

THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE!

STORY ▲
SHIROW
SHIRATORI

ART ▲
SHIRABII

SUPERVISION
▲ SAIYUKI

15





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"WHILE
WE'RE
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"AI HAPPENS
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Ai Hinatsuru

Women's 1-dan

© shirabi

Machi Kugui

Yamashiro Ouka

**Women's Legend League's
Simultaneous Final Round!**

© shirabi



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MEET THE CHARACTERS



YAICHI KUZURYU
Ryuo. Now with the Crown title, he is the youngest dual title holder in history. Only reads manga and Shogi books for the most part.



MACHI KUGUI
A striking beauty from Kyoto with two faces, Yamashiro Ouka and Shogi journalist. Also has superb editing skills.



AI HINATSURU
Yaichi's first apprentice. Since she can solve Shogi puzzles at a glance, her skills are often misinterpreted as speed-reading.



TAMAYO ROKUROBA
Women's 2-dan, currently in university. Despite her happy-go-lucky persona, she is a realist who only reads *How-To* books.



JIN NATAGIRI
Division A, 8-dan. A collector of Shogi match records, he is often spotted at used bookstores in Kanda, Tokyo.



AI YASHAJIN
Yaichi's second apprentice. Adamant about downloading books digitally, she is surprisingly skilled at saving up points.



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The first female professional Shogi player in history, currently on leave. Though extremely particular about food, she'll read just about anything.

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VOLUME 15

SHIROW SHIRATORI

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Cover, opening artwork and all illustrations

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ONE SINGLE PICTURE

There is a picture that I hold most dear.

It's from my first Shogi tournament when I was in elementary school, a picture of the four of us advanced to the quarter final.

"C'mon, big smiles everyone!"

I remember the journalists holding the cameras kept asking us to make big smiles.

Why did they ask so many times?

Because I was the only one crying.

Bawling my eyes out actually.

I can honestly say with absolute confidence: that is the hardest I've cried in my life. That's how upset I was.

At first I was crying because I lost.

But at some point ... the tears flowed for a different reason altogether.

Standing next to me was a little boy holding a trophy bigger than he was tall and completely at a loss as to what to do as tears kept pouring down my face.

"Don't cry, okay? You can't cry"

This boy, the shortest of all four of us, tried to comfort me the entire time.



When even his best efforts to get me to stop didn't work, he started telling me this story.

"A Shogi ghost shows up if you cry when you lose at Shogi!"

"..... A ghost?"

"Uh-huh! I live at my Master's house because I'm a live-in apprentice, and a Shogi ghost lives there, too! She's really really scary. She told me I'd be an embarrassment to the Shogi family if I didn't win today and shouldn't bother coming back to Osaka"

"That's horrible"

"Right?! She threatens to put my head on a pike and tells me to drop dead all the time, and she beats me up, too. And when I lose and start crying, she shows up out of nowhere and screams, Stop crying! at me."

This boy, desperately trying to comfort me, was also on the verge of tears as he looked me in the eyes.

"So ... please? Don't cry Ma-chan."

Hearing him say that only made me cry harder. I wailed.

But not because I was particularly sad.

This boy tries to comfort me when I cry. He looks at me and only me

That made me feel so happy, so serene that I kept on crying. This boy's attention was all that mattered to me.

If I have cried anywhere close to that many tears at any other point in my life it would have been Yes, just once.

Ten years after that tournament.

Now a Women's Shogi player, I also work as a journalist. All so that I can follow his Shogi. All so that I can have the best view of every single one of his battles and record them by my own hand.

I have taken many pictures of that boy as he grew up. His skills have grown by leaps and bounds, as has my equipment.

However, I'm still unable to take a picture that outdoes that specific one.

“A professional photographer can pour all sorts of time and money into their work, and yet sometimes a random picture taken by an amateur can be more moving than any of theirs.”

That’s what the journalist who took the picture that day and my current editor, Shogi Master and boss said.

But one day a thought struck me.

It isn’t that I wanted to take his picture, but more accurately ... *that I wanted to have my picture taken at his side.* That could be the real reason why no other pictures can surpass that one

Unfortunately, reality didn’t play out like that picture did.

A princess far more worthy than I was at his side. A strong beautiful Snow White.

But I came to terms with that fact. I didn’t think there was anything I could do about it.

It’s apparent to one and all that she was the heroine of the story, and I would pair the two of them together for a happy ending if I were the one writing it

I told myself that every time I took pictures of the two of them together. That I am nothing more than an observer.

That princess gradually transformed into a living legend within the Shogi world, eventually becoming the first female professional player history has ever known.

And that little boy—became the Demon King.

“It amazes me you can keep playing Shogi so close to that monster. Just being in the same generation makes me want to run and hide.”

Before I knew it, I was the only one pursuing the boy who spread despair in his wake whenever he played Shogi. It was all so that I might have a front row seat. All so that I could hear his words with my own ears.

“Don’t go thinking you can understand what he says, are we clear?”

Why not?

“Sure, he’s using the same words that we do, but the world he sees is

completely different. He is not lying to us, but his truths and ours aren't the same."

Then has everything I've ever seen been wrong?

"Hypothetically, if a book were ever written from his point of view, then I'm dang sure——"

A book, written in his words. A story that only exists within him.

I would love to read it. Would I appear in that story as well? Not just as an observer?

And if I am in it, what type of role would I be given?

With the conviction that I am the only one who should ever write that story along with him as his editor I raise my head with a new hope, a new ambition.

With the Princess, the one I considered to be the heroine, no longer part of his world ... then, just perhaps, I——.

RECORD 1

夜叉神天衣

AI
YASHAJIN

池田晶

AKIRA
IKEDA

TANGLED HAIR

“Hm? Oh, it’s snowing

A snowflake flutters down from the sky and I cup my hands to catch it.

Just as I take a look at the little crystal sitting in the palm of my hand, it melts away.

“..... Figures. I just got out of the hot spring.”

There’s nothing like a hot bath in the heart of winter.

Waves echo from the nearby shoreline.

But it’s so dark out that I can’t see the water, much less the scenery designated as one of the Three Great Views of Japan just around the corner.

I make my way from the hot spring back to the main building. It’s late at night, so it feels like I’m all alone out here.

Creak creak creak

The stairs squeak ever so slightly as I climb to the second floor.

Midnight, a room and an old Japanese-style inn.

I take out the cylindrical key to my room, a type of key that’s pretty rare these days, and slide the silver knob into the door. The lock clicks and I step inside.

My eyes adjust to the dim light and catch a glimpse of—

A naked woman.

“Huh?”

Stunned, her incredibly beautiful curves take my breath away and I fall, butt first, onto the *tatami* mat floor.

Hearing the plop, she Machi Kugui looks over at me.

“Yaichi? Have you returned?”

“S-Sorry, Ma-chan! I-I-I thought you were still in the hot spring!!”

“He-he, I only just walked in. Thus the moisture on my hair and skin, as well as my loose robe”

She slips the *yukata* up into place as if she’s done it thousands of times before.

From Kyoto, a noble family in fact, she makes even this plain *yukata*-style bathrobe from an old inn look elegant enough to be worn at a title match.

“Well, what are your thoughts on my figure? I was sure to clean every smidgen from head to toe.”

“Y-Yeah, I know! You’re pretty, I got it! W-Would would you please tie the front already?!”

“Aye. You may look if you so please?”

The robe is closed, yes, but After seeing exactly what’s right beneath it, I can’t bring myself to look her way at all



“Now Shall we continue?” says Machi, getting down on all fours and crawling toward me like a cat.

But I’m still frozen on the floor.

“A-Already?! My body can’t keep this up without a break

“Such a tease. Would you not entice me so?” Machi asks like it’s a favor.

But that look in her eyes says that she’s not going to take no for an answer.

“For what reason have the two of us stayed isolated in this very room for days on end? You needed that extra push to concentrate harder than ever, no? I have joined you here, Yaichi, so that our love and efforts may bear fruit.”

“Y-Yes, that’s true, but I can only do so much

“Didn’t you say you were nearly filled to bursting?”

I did say that, yes.

But that was because ... if I didn’t, Machi would never leave me alone.

Kicking my legs, I slide backwards on the floor in a useless attempt to resist.

“A-After all that you squeezed out of me yesterday, the tank is bone dry.....!”

“That won’t do. I need so much more.”

Machi tilts her head with frustration.

Then she points at a laptop shining brightly in the center of the room and says point blank, “There aren’t nearly enough pages to produce your maiden release. There needs to be much much more.”

“I realize that! You don’t have to tell me!”

Still sitting on the floor, I put my head in my hands and state my case on the verge of tears.

“You’re the one who set up this writing retreat for me, like I was some seasoned author and also a beautiful editor doing round-the-clock support, and I’m grateful!! But also, that put so much pressure on me that I’ve hit a wall!!”

“A virgin author who has yet to publish their maiden release has no right to

claim writers block. What you lack is commitment, plain and simple.”

Her argument hits me like a gut punch.

Just to be clear, what she was squeezing out of me yesterday was ideas. She has a way of sounding like a succubus in that sense, so sorry about that.

“Now, Sensei. Plant yourself in front of the computer and pick up where you left off. I’ll be seeing to it that you do not get a wink of sleep tonight, yes?”

“..... Just tonight? Because I don’t remember getting a decent night’s sleep since we got here

“Tee-he-he≡.”

Her lips curl into a suspicious grin, like one of those *Fushimi-inari* foxes, before my stunningly beautiful editor leans down to whisper in my ear.

“Come. Let’s change the world together

Everything has changed.

My older sister apprentice, who I had confessed my feelings for and she to me, has ghosted me and even disappeared from the entire Shogi world.

The live-in apprentice who I had been raising as carefully as I possibly could has moved out and transferred to Kanto.

And I——.

I’m alone with a friend from my childhood, one who has watched me closer than anyone this entire time as both a Women’s Shogi player and as a Shogi journalist, at an old Japanese-style inn for a cramming session to write a book.

This Shogi book will become my debut, or maiden release as she puts it.

“..... Why? Why did it turn out this way

Fatigue and sleep deprivation start playing tricks with my mind

My hands tremble and random muscles twitch nonstop from the after effects of all the energy drinks

Fingers resting on the keyboard, my consciousness slips back into the past.

Back to the New Year's Eve when my second apprentice, Ai Yashajin, came to pick me up——.

▲ CLOTHES SHOPPING AND HOUSE HUNTING

“..... Am I not good enough?”

A snowy New Year's Eve.

Stepping inside my front door at the stroke of midnight, Ai Yashajin tells me that she will live with me in place of Ai Hinatsuru.

I'm all alone and in horrible shape, but she reaches out to comfort me.

Ai Yashajin must've been outside, watching my apartment for hours. The tiny hands that she wraps around mine are cold as ice.

It's that coldness that sparks warmth within my heart.

“But are you sure?” Fighting back tears like my life depended on it, I ask my second apprentice, “You, who grew up like a princess, living in this rundown old apartment Living with *me* of all people——?”

In my head, I can see her answering something like: *I said it's fine! As long as I'm with you I don't care where we live!*

The Cinderella in my arms looks up at me and blinks a few times with snowflakes dotting her eyelashes.

Then, with her lips still blue from the cold, she says this.

“What? Me? Live in this dirty old shack of a doghouse on top of a shopping arcade? You can't be serious?”

“Huh?”

She was a pristine, elegant little girl just a few seconds ago. Now, however, that girl has vanished.

Um Isn't this scene supposed to go differently? Hold up?

The always high-handed lady Ai Yashajin pushes her way past me and stomps on the floor with her muddy shoes.

“Besides, the closest stations are JR and the Metro subway?! Unacceptable! Our place must be along the Hankyu Line, and that's final.”

“O-Okay

Seeing the level of faith Kansai natives have in the Hankyu train system with my own eyes leaves me speechless. I’d heard it’s particularly strong in people from Hyogo Prefecture, but wow

“Didn’t you hear me? I said I’m going to knock this place down.”

Ai nods at the woman behind her—Akira Ikeda. She steps forward and thrusts a piece of paper in front of my face.

“Here’s the deed. In other words, this land now belongs to the Yashajin Group. We already have plans to develop it, so leave the premises immediately.”

“Th-This is tyranny!”

She actually did buy this whole apartment building?!

I was so happy to have someone to talk to when she said that before that I let it slide, but This room is filled with so many memories. I can’t just let her tear it down!

“I know my rights as a renter!! The law says you can’t force me out without proper notification well in advance!”

“Hmmm. For you to have knowledge that doesn’t pertain to Shogi or young girls Pesky.”

You of all people shouldn’t be talking.

Folding up the deed and putting it back in her suit pocket, Akira keeps her hand inside her jacket and says.

“By the way, Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Are you aware of my specialty?”

“L-Land sharking?”

NO! NO! NO!

“Th-Then lawful eviction maybe?”

NO! NO! NO!

“Huh? Okay what?”

“Chum production.”

“Chum?”

“I’m telling you that I’m particularly skilled at making fish feed.”

As in, that’s what she’s threatening to do to me?!

“So long as the evidence is cooked and broken down into flakes small enough to be consumed by animals, it can disappear forever. Pigs used to fill that role, but apparently human DNA can be recovered from their droppings. However, fish in the ocean don’t have that drawback.”

“And there’s a chance of meeting Ai in Tokyo, or Ginko Sora, wherever she happens to be, if the fish eat it up. It’ll just be as the main course instead,” adds Ai as if she doesn’t care either way.

Sure, I want to see them, but not like that!

“I merely jest, Kuzuryu-sensei. Of course, we will be relocating you to a new residence. Surely you can wait to answer until you have seen it?”

New residence?

“I can see why this area has been at the top of the Most Desirable Places to Live in Kansai ranking for so many years in a row. Being so close to Osaka and Kobe is so convenient.”

The next morning the three of us visit a towering apartment complex directly connected to a train station.

Hankyu Nishinomiya Kitaguchi Station, to be exact. Everyone calls it Nishi-Kita.

Apparently it was the setting for an anime based on a light novel. As for me, I’m filled with dread. I just know the price is going to have tons of zeros in it

“Good natural light and the view isn’t bad either. The floor plan is a bit cramped, but it should be within our price range,” says a satisfied lady Ai Yashajin as she looks down at Nishinomiya proper from the window of a living room large enough to hold a title match.

Cramped? This is anything but cramped. There are so many rooms in here, I don’t know what we’d do with all of them. Yaichi Kuzuryu is officially lost for words

My knees are shaking like mad. It's not because of how high we are off the ground. I'm worried about how high the price tag is going to be.

"O-Our price range? Just how expensive is this apartment?"

"I don't know. ¥400 million, I guess?"

"Four hun——?!"

"You've made about ¥100 million since becoming a professional player, right? Combine your prize money from the Ryuo and Crown Title Matches, and that's ¥70 million right there. Defend your titles for another five years and it'll be paid off in full. Even if you don't, my family's company will cover the difference."

"Do not worry, Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Loan regulations are extremely lax. This listing also happens to belong to the Yashajin Group."

The grin on Akira's face as she talks is what's making me worry.

Th-These two Are they trying to get me to buy an extremely expensive apartment by saying they'll live with me here?!

"..... Ai, can I have a word please?"

"Whaaat Yaichi?"

"I'm happy that you've offered to live with me. But there's a reason why I'm living at that apartment. I know it's small and seen better days, but it's really close to——."

"An elementary school, right?"

"No!! The Shogi Association!!"

It's true that the school Ai went to is just around the block, which is why I was able to teach a Shogi class there, but ...!

"What difference does that make? Nearly all practice sessions are done online these days and now that most players research with software anyway, there's no point living close to the association anymore. The Player's Room is always deserted."

"Ugh"

"Umeda is only 14 minutes away from here by train. That isn't far and I won't

let you tell me otherwise. Besides, there's no telling how long the Kansai Association building is going to be——."

"My lady. Now isn't the time ..."

"Mn anyway!"

Ai pauses for a moment after Akira cut her off before she could finish that sentence.

"Right now you make more money than anyone else in the Shogi world, even more than the Meijin!! What's the rest of society going to think when they find out you're living in a tiny old apartment, dressed in rags and eating frozen food for dinner every night?! It's about time you acknowledge your position and start acting like it!"

"Yes, ma'am"

Me, the man at the top of the Shogi world, is not only being forced to buy an expensive apartment by a grade schooler, but I'm getting lectured by her, too. The pain

"It's settled. We'll be living here. Akira, have all the affairs in order by the time we come back."

"As you wish, my lady."

As I have no say in the matter, there's nothing to say. Now that I think about it, Big Sis is the one who picked out my old room, too.

More importantly——.

"By the time we get back? Are we going someplace else?"

"Many places, yes," says lady Ai, turning toward me as she flicks her long black hair over her shoulder. Then she points at the jacket I'm wearing and declares, "the first of which is to do something about that eyesore you're wearing."

The first shop that Ai and I visit is a long-standing clothier in the heart of Kobe.

"This is grandp- *Cough* grandfather's favorite place to buy tailored suits. In fact, suits have been around in Kobe longer than anywhere else in Japan."

It seems that Ai is out to criticize what I wear, what I eat and where I live. So, pretty much everything. Does she actually have feelings for me? Or am I just some Pawn to her?

“This jacket Big Sis picked it out for me the day I turned pro. Sure, it’s nothing fancy, but it’s very important to me.”

“I’m not telling you to throw it away,” says Ai with an exaggerated nod, as if trying to show how compassionate she is. “Just don’t wear it around me again, that’s all.”

“How is that any different?!”

“Hey, Yaichi.”

She steps right up to me.

?!

My heartrate skyrockets. Is she about to ambush me with another kiss?

But she doesn’t grab my necktie. Instead, she pats my shoulders and sleeves before calmly saying, “You’ve grown, haven’t you? The jacket looks small.”

“D-Do you think so? Well I was 15 when I bought it, and I might have been in the middle of a growth spurt back then, but”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about. Since you need new clothes anyway, why not get something nice?”

“.....”

In the end, all I can do is nod.

And, since accessories get added with every upgrade, Ai picks out all sorts of items to match my new suit.

Shirts with collars. A coat. Gloves. A scarf. Dress shoes. A belt. Even a wallet.

The final total comes to ¥2 million. That’s a major shopping spree. What I can’t figure out is why it feels cheap after buying a ¥400 million apartment!

“Oh! You clean up very well. Not bad, Sensei, not bad at all.”

“R-Really? Don’t you think all this black is a bit too much?”

Letting Ai coordinate the whole outfit resulted in quite a dark fashion

statement—though I have a feeling that Ayumu would give it two thumbs up and shout, At last, you show your true form, Nemesis! if he ever saw me dressed like this.

But as depressed as I am, all this black does strike a chord with me.

New clothes that won't bring back memories of the good old days are oddly warm and comfortable though part of that is probably thanks to the tailor. This guy is good.

Ai walks around me as if appraising my new look and says, "Yaichi you're called the Demon King, aren't you?"

"..... How should I know? I've never called myself that."

"But you are."

"....."

It wasn't until Mirai Futatsuzuka 4-*dan* told me that I found out young players in Tokyo had come up with that nickname for me.

As a competitor, knowing that I strike fear in the hearts of my opponents makes me happy, or part of me anyway.

But Ginko said this to me under the starry skies of my hometown: *I don't like it. It doesn't fit who you are at all.*

So I won't go along with that as my name. I don't want to say it's a good fit.

But the smile grows on Ai Yashajin's lips as she sweetly whispers, "Demon King sounds good to me."

"Huh?"

I'm stunned as she leans up to my ear.

"You see, I'll take demons over angels any day. Rather than white clothes, I prefer black. Forget the knight in shining armor I want the bad guy to whisk me away."

This 11-year-old girl, who's more familiar with the deepest pits of sadness than anyone I know, is bewitching as she whispers.

Her voice so soothing I could melt.

“So, be the Demon King and seize all the glory. Make the thought of sitting across the board from you the very definition of despair for all your opponents Okay?”

That’s when it finally hits me.

Ai Yashajin didn’t come to save me. Just the opposite.

This young girl dressed in black could be a tiny devil who came to invite me all the way to the deepest pits of darkness.

Deeper and deeper into the blackest void this world knows, a darkness called Shogi—.

Once we’d visited a few more shops, Akira greets us at the door of our new apartment. Yes, it’s now officially where we live.

“Welcome home, my lady,” says Akira as she bows her head while wearing a maid’s outfit.

“Will you be having dinner? Will you be having a bath? Or would you be having ... a Shogi match?”

“Huh? Akira, what’s this about? Cosplaying?” I ask, completely at a loss.

Ai sighs and explains. “She said she wants to wear this whenever she’s doing housework. I told her not to, but as you can see”

“Housework? Akira?”

“You don’t expect me to cook and clean, do you? Besides, Master or not, living together with a lolicon is far too dangerous. Akira will be moving in with us.”

“And there you have it! I am your new roommate, Kuzuryu-sensei!!” says Akira while spinning a broom around like a bow staff in one of those old kung fu movies out of Hong Kong and strikes a pose.

Today’s our first day of living as a group of three. It looks like I won’t have time to be lonely anymore.

“Hello, roomie Hold up! I’ve got no problem with Akira living here, but what was that about living together with me being dangerous?! Cut that out

already, will you?! First you go saying that I chose my old apartment because there was a school nearby, and now this?! Let me make it crystal clear: I'll never get so lonely that I would ever consider making an advance on a grade school girl

My phone rings in my pocket just as I get up to state my case. One glance at the screen to see who it is, and I come to a halt as if lightning nailed me in the head.

Next comes Ai's cold glare.

"A phone call? Who makes phone calls on New Year's Day?"

"..... An elementary school"

"Akira. The police."

"At once!"

DOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOON'T!!

IN THE 6TH GRADE

That day, I stop by the school that my apprentice once attended. I'm not trespassing, of course. I was invited.

"It has been a while Kanegasaka-*sensei*."

"Since the Shopping Arcade Summer Festival, I believe. Kuzuryu-*sensei*."

That was more than half a year ago. Time flies.

I didn't think I'd ever see her again.

Kanegasaka-*sensei* used to be Ai and her best friend Mio Mizukoshi's homeroom teacher. Since classes don't shuffle between fifth and sixth grade, she would have been their homeroom teacher as sixth graders too.

However, Mio's family moved abroad after her father was transferred.

And Ai isn't in Osaka anymore.

"So, what is it you wanted to talk about? Since Ai is in Tokyo, I honestly don't think we have a connection anymore. I'm moving out of the neighborhood, so doing Shogi classes isn't really possible——."

"I first spoke to Miss Hinatsuru about transferring schools *before* the King of Naniwa Tournament."

"..... What?"

Blindsided, my mind goes blank.

"The King of Naniwa Tournament The last one Mio played in before she transferred? Then Ai was already planning to move to Tokyo all the way back then?"

"No. I was the one who approached her."

The words start pouring out of her. A past that I never knew starts coming to light.

"A great many private schools are desperate to enroll gifted children, and the one I introduced to her was part of an elevator system that would have put her

on a direct path to university. With the steadily declining birthrate, more schools than you could imagine in Tokyo and Osaka would bend over backwards for a student like Ai Hinatsuru. A school like that would certainly be understanding when it came to Shogi, don't you agree?"

"..... I do. I think that would have been a great option."

Having attended public school during elementary and junior high, balancing my school schedule with the Sub League was a constant battle. I can definitely see the merit in going to a private school.

Actually, watching everything I went through is the main reason why Big Sis went to a private junior high school.

"If I may speak as a public school teacher in charge of compulsory education for a moment, bringing out Miss Hinatsuru's true potential in this setting was next to impossible. Considering that I had my doubts about her living with you at the time, I was rather insistent that she look into a transfer."

"What did she say?"

"She refused immediately. Miss Hinatsuru told me that being at your side and receiving your training was the only way for her talent to grow."

".....!! Ai"

My whole chest heats up in an instant.

I adjust my glasses to make sure that Kanegasaka-sensei doesn't notice the tears leaking out of my eyes, but she isn't finished talking.

Now, though, she's having a harder time stringing words together.

"Once Miss Mizukoshi, and the necessary balance she provided, was gone I thought I should suggest transferring once again. However——."

"She came to you first this time, right? Asking what she'd need to do to transfer."

"That's correct."

Those few words tear into my heart like a nail.

"She swore me to secrecy at the time, but While you were traveling the country to take part in the Crown Title Matches, Miss Hinatsuru toured several

schools around Tokyo along with her parents.”

“I see

Once she joined the Women’s Legend League, Ai went to Tokyo many times for her matches. She must’ve been looking into schools then, too.

I spoke with Ai, and her mother, plenty of times.

But I never had a clue that this was going on.

Thinking back to those days I became the Crown Challenger and was winning a lot, so I can’t deny I had tons of matches to play. It was my busiest time ever as a pro player.

— So what?

My heart cringes.

—What was I focused on while my live-in apprentice was trying to figure out her future?

My own romance and Shogi, nothing else.

—I failed as a Master

My shoulders slump as everything dawns on me. That’s when Kanegasaka-*sensei* makes an unusual admission.

“Honestly I was relieved. Knowing I wouldn’t have Ai Hinatsuru in my class next year took an incredible amount of weight off my shoulders.”

“Sensei?”

“I was relieved, yes. After all, how am I supposed to work with a child who has that much talent? What could I possibly do for her? She has already experienced more pressure and high-stakes situations than most adults ever will What could I, a woman who lives an easy life under her parents’ roof, teach a little girl who willingly left home all by herself to undergo rigorous training in Osaka?”

Kanegasaka-*sensei* puts both hands on her forehead and bares her innermost feelings.

“Whenever those big round eyes fell on me It was like she could see just

how inexperienced I am, and it scared me. So So!!”

—Ahh I get it. That’s what’s going on

I finally understand why she contacted me.

This is a confession. She wants me to take her to task for her sins.

“Kanegasaka-*sensei*!”

Which is why I put my hands on my knees, bow and say as loud and clear as I can.

“Thank you for doing so much to help my apprentice!”

“Huh?”

“..... I was a horrible Master. I thought I was putting Ai first, that I understood her needs better than anyone. But I never acknowledged how much she had grown. It was my responsibility to accept her feelings head on, but I”

I I knew that she had feelings for me beyond the Master-apprentice relationship.

Yet I looked the other way out of convenience. I convinced myself that her feelings would go away on their own, that it was just innocent puppy love.

I swear to myself here and now—I’ll accept her feelings no matter what they may be the next time we meet.

“But you focused on what was best for bringing out her talents and even showed her the way, didn’t you? Ai was lucky to have had you as her homeroom teacher, Kanegasaka-*sensei*!”

“.....! Kuzuryu *sensei*!”

“Would you please tell me about Ai’s new school?”

“..... It’s a superb institution. The top one on my list of recommendations, to be precise.”

She then pulls out the school’s pamphlet and explains everything Ai’s new school has to offer.

Cursing myself for being so inexperienced that I make everyone around me feel like they’re the ones who’re making mistakes, I ask, “Do you know how

she's doing?"

"I have received letters from her, yes. The first included an apology to her classmates for leaving without saying goodbye. Then she wrote that she is doing well and studying hard in Tokyo. That letter came with a Shogi puzzle she made herself."

"That sounds like her."

I breathe a small sigh of relief at the news, but Kanegasaka-sensei frowns as she continues.

"She certainly sounds healthy and content, it's just"

"Just what?"

"The return addresses for the two letters were different The first one came from Tokyo's HinaTsuru Inn, but I didn't recognize the second one. It has been on my mind."

"Whaaat?!"

I'm on my feet before I know it. Then——

"Then where the heck is Ai living now?"

SUKUNAHIKONA

Leaving the elementary school, I head for——Yodoyabashi.

It's full of government buildings and Osaka's largest business area, but my sights are set on someplace completely different.

"Let's see, Doshomachi this way. How many years has it been?"

I make my way past all the skyscrapers along Midosuji Street toward Kitahama in the east.

This area used to be famous for being lined with wholesalers, and plenty of the old buildings still have pharmacies or shops filled with medical supplies.

The scenery becomes more nostalgic the further I get from Midosuji.

Stopping in front of the building I've been looking for, I take a deep breath.

"This is the place right? It's hard to recognize it without a festival going on"

Sukunahikona Shrine.

I've been to this shrine sandwiched between two buildings many times and have many memories here.

"..... It's roomier on the inside than it looks from the outside."

But it's still small for a shrine.

All the Chinese herbal medicine shops in the neighborhood add an authentic Chinese feel. Regular shrines have lots of *ema* plates hanging from a sacred tree on the grounds, but the tree here has tons of yellow cloth said to ward off disease hanging from its branches.

And the person I want to talk to is kneeling at the foot of that sacred tree. Absolutely covered in power stones

"Master."

Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan* stays hunched over, not even looking up as he says, "..... How'd ya know?"

“I’ve heard you’re spending more time around Yodayabashi these days. I figured this was why. That you were coming here to pray.”

Osaka’s festivals begin with *Tooka Ebisu*, held on January 10th at Ebisu Shrine in Imamiya, and end right here at Sukunahikona Shrine with the *Shinnosai* Festival in November. That’s why the *Shinnosai* Festival is called *Tome No Matsuri* or The Finisher.

That’s the yearly cycle.

Back when Ginko and I were still kids until Ginko won the Queen title, the four members of the Kiyotaki Shogi family came here every November.

It was to pray for frail Ginko’s health.

With all this nostalgia pumping through my veins, I can almost see two little Shogi players in the making standing side-by-side in front of the main shrine with their heads bent in prayer as I say to Master, “I figured you were here, praying for Big Sis’s health like you used to. Right?”

“.....”

That’s when I notice the small toy Master is holding in his right hand.

It’s a yellowish papier-mâché tiger, the symbol of the festival.

“That’s one of those things Big Sis begged you to buy her every year, isn’t it?”

Being a sickly girl, she always got one. She would then shove it in my face and brag, which seriously made me jealous. Thinking back on it now, I was such a brat.

—I was the one who had what money couldn’t buy.

“How about we sit down and talk? On a chair, not the ground.”

I help Master to his feet.

There’s no alcohol on his breath. He just seems to be really tired.

“Hold up! The tiger I can understand, but did you have to buy all these power stones, too?! No one needs this many Huh?! The shrine shop sells these things?!”

I pull Master’s arm, along with all the power stone bracelets and cellphone

charms that used to be popular back in the day dangling from it, all the way to a small bench and get him to sit down.

Why do temples and shrines sell power stones at all?! Doesn't taking advantage of the weak go against everything Shinto and Buddhism stand for?!

"Yaichi Ya hate my guts, don' ya? Come to kick me outta my own Shogi family? Berate the pathetic old man I've become? Scathe me?"

"....."

"It'd make me feel a heck'va lot better if ya did, 'at's fer sure"

Just like Kanegasaka-*sensei* earlier, Master is in horrible shape. What can I possibly say to him?

It's true that I was furious with him.

I thought that if he hadn't forbidden Ginko and I to date, things would've worked out differently. I was certain of it.

But, in the end I ended up blaming myself over and over again because I couldn't do anything.

"..... I"

Sitting on the bench like a boxer who's been against the ropes one round too long, Master starts mumbling, "I never hadda lick o' talent"

"Is that why you considered making me Chairman Tsukimitsu's apprentice instead?"

"..... His Shogi's got an edge that mine doesn't. Been reminded of 'at more times than I can count."

Master went against Seiichi Tsukimitsu, his older brother apprentice, in the Meijin Title Match.

Kousuke Kiyotaki puts exactly what separates him from the Eternal Meijin into words.

"My Shogi's all 'bout hunkerin' down over the board and endurin' long enough to win on sheer grit. Holdin' out til the other guy don' have any fight left in him is just a nice way o' puttin' it. All I really do is make 'em so bored they lose focus and make a mistake. I pick up the win from there. Won more than

half my matches like that, to tell the truth.”

“You know that’s not true

“Players with talent, they light a fire in their opponent’s belly. Playin’ against someone with true talent makes ya feel like you’re gettin’ stronger

His voice is weak, but there’s such a powerful aura behind it I can’t get another word in.

I understand where he’s coming from, too. I felt that way after playing against the Meijin myself.

But why is he being so hard on himself?

“Players can pick up on talent right away. Everyone is beratin’ my gritty, stubborn style of Shogi in the back of their heads That much is painfully obvious. After all, I’m a player too

“But that’s what Kansai Shogi is!”

I couldn’t let that pass without speaking up.

Ginko and mine, Mr. Kagamizu and Keika’s It sounded like he was degrading not only our playing styles, but everyone we know in the Kansai area.

“Stubbornly hanging on for as long as it takes, winning even if you have to get dragged through the mud, that’s Kansai Shogi! Big Sis and I came to you because we idolized you and all the wrinkles on your right pant leg! All those pretty boys in Kanto can eat dirt! Throwing in the towel way too early, trying to go out in style, it’s all so——.”

“Throwin’ in early would’a saved me a lotta pain.”

“Huh?”

“I should’a given up. Should’a raised the white flag and been done with it. But I couldn’t, and I’ve been sufferin’ for it So much Ginko GINKOOO!”

Master howls with his face in his hands.

The man who fought on pure effort and determination claims to regret everything. The one people called *ironclad* for never giving up no matter how desperate the situation is now wiping tears and snot off his face.

“Pickin’ up all the useless things from her Master, she ought not A talentless apprentice, that’s what she was”

“Master!”

Before I knew it, I was crying along with him.

Because, well, now I completely understand why he’s being so hard on himself.

Because Ginko saw more of Master’s Shogi than anyone Because she always watched him play, her style was more similar to his than anyone else in our Shogi family.

It’s pretty much a miracle for any Shogi player to have an apprentice whose playing style matches their own.

Despite all the criticism and verbal abuse that Ai Yashajin puts me through, the reason I took her hand was because we have so much in common. Our playing style, our circumstances

Passing on the traits even a biological child couldn’t inherit, an apprentice ... a child born from my Shogi.

How could that be anything but adorable?

No matter how much he may have wanted to, Master couldn’t bring himself to abandon Ginko.

He could’ve easily made her quit Shogi if that’s what he’d decided to do.

If Master had stopped looking out for her, it would’ve been impossible for Ginko to continue playing. And no one expected him to raise such a sickly girl in the first place. He already had his hands full as a pro Shogi player. Adding a girl who required so much attention to his workload would have been nothing but a nuisance.

Yes. A complete nuisance.

Not only did he take on that nuisance of a child he made sure she was comfortable and gave her all the love, time and support she could ever need.

He brought her into his home.

Taught her Shogi until his fingernails cracked.

Took care of her whenever she had a fever.

Found one reason or another to stay at the Shogi Association just in case when she had Sub League matches.

And is praying for her with all his might despite being so far away from her right now. All while tormenting himself for not being able to do more

Is there any other human being in the whole world who could do that much for a frail girl who's not related to them by blood?

Is there anyone who even comes close to our Master?

"..... I won't. I'm not kicking you out," I say loud and clear as I wipe my tears away. "I won't berate you or scathe you either. After all, I came here to ask you for advice."

"Advice ya say?"

"It can wait until later. But there's one thing I want to know right now."

I highly doubt anything Master says when his confidence is this far down the drain will be useful at all.

However.

There is just one thing I absolutely have to ask him.

"Where is Ai living in Tokyo?"

Master has calmed down, but my question makes his shoulders jump.

"I was under the impression that Ai was living with her parents at the HinaTsuru's Tokyo branch. But she's not. I asked my brother about it, but he didn't even know that Ai had transferred to Tokyo."

"..... Ya got nothin' to worry 'bout. I entrusted her to the player I trust more 'an anyone else."

Then Master knew!

Forcing myself to breathe, I wait for Master's next words.

"To be more exact They made the offer and Ai accepted on her own

The two of 'em came to me, and I gave 'em permission."

"The Kanto player you trust the most?"

And that player was the one who suggested Ai transfer to Kanto?

Only a few people come to mind.

"Was it Shakando-*sensei*?"

"No. He's a pro."

"Ayumu?"

"....."

Master silently shakes his head.

Then he says the man's name. A man I know very well. One of the best players in the Shogi world.

The moment that name registers—I scream at the top of my lungs.

"WHAA"

Oh crap.

N-Not him Anyone but him!

OH ... CRAAAAAAAP!!!!

EASTWARD

“Rokuroba-sensei. One-minute Shogi begins now.”

I sit up straight at that untimely announcement, take a deep breath and slap my cheeks to psych myself up for the final stretch.

“Okay!!”

One short and sweet response later, I lean over the board.

My formation is on life support. My waiting time is gone.

“..... To top it all off, I’m going against a title holder!”

The match recorder counts down the seconds as I charge forward knowing it’s do or die. I’m dropping the shields and charging in with guns blazing. It’ll all be over if I get the enemy King first.

I guess my opponent wasn’t expecting me to attack now because she uses some of her waiting time to think things through before deciding to tighten her defenses.

I press my attack without waiting a single second. Seeing her fingers pull back is my signal to charge full speed ahead.

“.....!! Playin’ fast, huh? Grrr”

My opponent, heralded as the Aggressive Archangel, glares daggers at me.

This is what happens when the lower ranking player gets backed into a corner and bears her fangs.

Plus, playing a move using no time is as good a taunt as they come. You can’t back down now, can you Ryou?

“You got guts, thinkin’ you can go toe-to-toe with me Die!!!”

“Scary, scary.”

SNAP!! She tries to intimidate me by snapping a piece down like a firecracker, but I shrug it off and keep making moves in one second flat.

Messing with her speed? Hardly. There’s no way I could ever outread her.

—Lucky fingers, plain and simple.

If it comes down to luck, I've got a fighting chance. So I'm making sure it's impossible for either of us to read that far ahead and going for broke. It will come down to a coin toss.

Why? Because Lady Luck has been with me and I'm riding with her to the end!

Win today, and it'll be the first time I've ever won 10 league match victories in a row. I put all my faith in that momentum and rush forward at breakneck speed.

I chant over and over in my head: —C'mon, mess up! Mess up! MESSUPMESSUPMESSUPMESSUP!!!!

And Ryo Tsukiyomizaka does mess up.

"Tch I'm out," she hisses, slapping all her captured pieces off the stand and onto the board. The urge to pump my fist in triumph hits. Of course I don't do it, but I'm so happy right now that I would love to.

How many years has it been since I beat a title holder? Have I ever beaten a title holder?

Even better this win puts me one big step closer to my *goal*.

The lifelong goal every Shogi player has: a title.

"This is new. I thought you always landed on your feet, Ryou."

"..... Ya played a better game."

I'm not wet enough behind the ears to take those words at face value. As her opponent, I can tell better than anyone that Ryou wasn't at her best. I've got a pretty good idea why she couldn't focus today, too.

Women's Shogi players can be divided into two groups.

Those who hate me and those who utterly despise me.

The young woman sitting across the board is the type who loathes me with every fiber of her being. She didn't even bother to try hiding that *go die in a fire* aura during our match.

Not that I care either way!

If her hatred is strong enough to be a distraction, why should I complain?

“That sure was a come-from-behind, down-to-the-wire kind of match☆! If I remember right, you have two losses now? I never thought I’d see the day! I thought I was in for another rough season when Machi wiped the board with me in the first match, but now that I’ve won four straight Women’s Legend League matches, I can almost see the title match”

I had plenty more I was going to say, but I run out of steam in the middle.

Because, frankly, she isn’t listening to a word of it.

She’s not even looking at me. Her eyes are aimed further back at a different match going on.

I look over and——.

“..... He- re Here”

See the tiniest Women’s Shogi player in the room swaying back and forth like a little metronome.

Ai Hinatsuru Women’s 1-*dan*.

She is by far the youngest participant in the season’s Women’s Legend League. Not to mention that out of the 10 of us here, she has by far the fewest victory stars. I’m pretty sure she started the season with three straight losses.

“Curious about Shorty, are you?”

“.....”

“You put on a clinic against her in the first match, remember? She’s doesn’t measure up to you, not even close! Even I beat her no problem.♪”

“..... If only.”

It seems the Archangel isn’t interested in talking to a bottom feeder anymore and wipes all the pieces off our board.

“Skippin’ the review session, ’kay?”

Then, from behind me, a woman’s voice says, “I lost.”

And an elementary school girl replies, “Thank you for the match.”

“Oh Hello, Rokuroba-*sensei*.”

By pure coincidence, I end up on the same train platform as that elementary school girl at Sendagaya Station after my match.

“Hi.”

The girl bows her head so cutely. I acknowledge her with a little one-handed wave and immediately look the other way.

We’re not all that familiar.

Now her younger sister apprentice, let’s just say *we’ve met*. Though I doubt she feels the same way.

Her Master, Yaichi Kuzuryu, owes me.

Thanks to Jin-Jin and I breaking to do commentary during the first Crown Title Match, he made it out in time for Snow White’s 4-*dan* promotion. He owes me a ton.

That being said, I barely have any connection with this Ai: Ai Hinatsuru.

We’ve played before. It was the second match of the season’s Women’s Legend League. I was so in control from start to finish, it felt like taking candy from a baby.

Playing against her, I got the sense her heart was someplace else, and she just went through the motions during the review session. I don’t have much of an impression of her to go on.

Then she went and lost her third straight match. The league had only just started and she’s as good as out of the running already.

“..... Well, I suppose she can’t really help that”

The Kiyotaki Line went from the top of the world to the doghouse in just three short months, after all

The first female professional Shogi player ever: Naniwa’s Snow White — Ginko Sora.

The youngest professional ever to hold two titles: Demon King of the West — Yaichi Kuzuryu.

Simultaneously the youngest Women's League Player and title challenger ever: Kobe's Cinderella — Ai Yashajin.

And the youngest participant in the Women's Legend League ever: Ai Hinatsuru.

They utterly trounced what was considered *normal* while whipping all of Japan into a frenzy. Shogi's popularity exploded to an unprecedented degree. Since Ginko Sora never went on TV, Kanto professionals and Women's Players were tapped for TV and radio shows all over the place. It was a Shogi bubble, plain and simple.

“Whew, what a doozy it was! The Women's Shogi world lived it up, too. That spotlight sure was nice.”

I clasp my hands together and enjoy all these memories of bubblier times. Delish!

It goes without saying that Ginko Sora inspired girls all over the country to learn how to play Shogi. The popularity of Women's Shogi skyrocketed.

Get more Women's League matches on the air!

But there aren't enough players!

Then expand the Practice League!

Boom, boom, done. I don't think a single day passed without a Women's League player on TV somewhere.

Until that day, anyway.

Snow White Loss.

That's what all the talk shows and chat rooms have started calling Ginko Sora's disappearing act. We Women's Players simply referred to it as the *Ginko Shock*.

The Women's Shogi world fell apart overnight.

Maintain the status quo? Hah! It all came crashing down like a house of cards. All six Women's Shogi titles are in a serious bind, but two are in danger of disappearing altogether.

Without Ginko Sora, the leagues that determine the Queen and Women's

Throne titles have come to a screeching halt. Word has it that the sponsors pulled out, claiming that the association violated their contracts, and now are demanding compensation. The same thing could happen to the other Women's titles any day.

Association Chairman Tsukimitsu and the other board members are frantically searching for new sponsors. My Master is on the board, but I can't get in touch with him for the life of me.

At times like this, the title holders themselves need to be the *pillars* that hold everything up. Shakando-*sensei* is certainly doing her part, but Ryou has turned into a husk of her former self, who knows what Machi is doing over in Kansai and Ika Sainokami is acting further off the deep end as usual. Three out of the four are totally useless. We're doomed.

And all that hate is directed at the Kiyotaki Line.

Especially here in Kanto, players are furious that events that have no connection to them (or so they think) have turned the Shogi world inside out and upside down.

So that fury is naturally directed toward the weakest link.

The Demon King of the West and Kobe's Cinderella are so strong that they're untouchable, so the mob set their sights on Ai Hinatsuru.

Talking behind her back, leaving her out of things, ignoring her and the like. No one's gotten violent, but the Shogi Association building is turning into the ugly side of an all-girls school. As in the present continuous tense.

Honestly, I'm amazed that an elementary school girl can still sit down and play Shogi in the middle of it all.

I'm pretty sure Ryou beat her with skill during the opening match.

But was she at her best when I beat her? Fat chance. How could she be? I mean, other players are coming up to me saying "Thanks!" and "Way to show her!" right after I won. I admit I grinned and enjoyed the attention, though.

Hah.

Which is why I can't afford to have anyone from the association seeing me acting buddy-buddy with her. A Shogi player or association staff member is

never further than a stone's throw away at Sendagaya Station. Not to mention that she and I are rivals currently fighting for a ticket to the Women's Legend Title Match.

"No reason whatsoever to be friendly Nope."

The train slides up to the platform and I get on. The elementary school girl boards the train car next to mine.

After swaying back and forth with the click-clack on the rails for a while, I get off to change trains and follow the stream of people to the next platform only to see——.

A short silhouette walking not too far in front of me.

"A-hem!"

I move up to her without thinking things through.

Seriously, my legs just sped on their own.

"Can I help you?"

The elementary school girl looks up at me, surprised.

"Didn't you get on the wrong train? You have to go to Shinagawa Station to catch the bullet train back to Shin-Osaka——."

"No. I'm fine."

"..... Okay then, not that I care."

I break off eye contact and speed up to overtake the elementary school girl. As they say, out of sight out of mind!

My second train comes into the station. I get on and open the association's home page on my phone to see if there's any news.

Yep, I knew it.

"Ai Hinatsuru Women's 1-*dan*, Kanto transfer official."

..... Well, young Women's League players transfer all the time. Going to university, family situation, there's all sorts of reasons.

Maybe her shearing off most of her long hair to change her image has something to do with it?

Personally, I think putting as much space between her and that burning dumpster of a Shogi family as possible is a smart move.

“Yep, yep, I get it. She has to make lots of smart moves from here on out. All of us Women’s League players do.”

She’s smiling from ear to ear in her profile picture on the association’s home page. Silently, I start talking to that still long-haired elementary school girl staring back at me from my phone.

You’re cute and, while nothing special just yet, I think you have a lot of talent. You’ll have a new Master in no time, trust me! With a new Kanto Shogi family to back you up, all this bullying will clear up in no time. Isn’t that great? Who knows, maybe we could end up as friends at some point?

I get off the train with all of that going through my mind.

Leaving the station, I start walking to my apartment as the sun comes down.

This part of Tokyo is known for having a bunch of schools, so students live here in droves. It’s a decently safe neighborhood.

My apartment is a short walk away from my university.

It just so happens that a professional player rented two apartments right next to each other in that building, one for himself and one for Shogi research. I ended up moving in to his research room.

It gets plenty of sun and there’s a full dining room and kitchen to go with the bedroom. Not bad, right? I’m not exactly paying rent anyway. *(Ha-ha.)*

“After winning today, maybe I’ll go and buy a little treat to celebrate?”

After all, it’s best to appease the renter! Picking up the pace a little bit——.

Step, step, step.

Tick, tick, tick.

Yep.

I hear them. I’ve heard them ever since I left the station. Tiny familiar footsteps

“.....”

Turning around, there's the elementary school girl right behind me.

"Hey."

"Can I help you?"

"Are you following me?"

"No, I'm not. I live in this direction, too."

"..... I see."

An elementary school girl? Living in a college town? My university does have an elevator elementary school, but it's in the opposite direction. *Aren't you lost?* There are plenty of things I want to say, but I ignore her and walk up to my apartment building.

Step, step, step.

Tick, tick, tick.

The same footsteps as before are still following me. Like a demon.

Finally I stop outside my apartment door.

"Okay, what's your deal, little girl?! You can't expect me to believe you live here!!"

"Yes, I do."

"Yeah right!! A-Are you trying to break into my apartment in the dead of night to get revenge for losing to me in the Women's Legend League?!"

The argument starts with a bang when suddenly—.

"Hi there! Nice to see you made it."

The next door over clicks open at the perfect moment and the renter sticks his head out—with a suave greeting, as usual.

"Jin-Jin!"

"Natagiri-sensei!"

Her speaking over me instantly gets under my skin, so I turn to the renter—Jin Natagiri 8-*dan* and tell him exactly what's going on.

"You'll never believe this, Jin-Jin! She *followed me here all the way from the Shogi*

Association! And, if you can believe it, she claims that she lives here——”

“Because she does.”

“Huh?”

“Ai is going to be living in that room starting today. Would you be a dear, Tamayo, and move out?”

..... Huh?

▲ CHIRITORI DUSTPAN

“I’m leaving for Tokyo tonight!!” I declare at the top of my lungs as soon as I step through the door of Master’s place.

Then, once I get the shoes off my absent-minded Master, I pull him into the *tatami* room. Just to be clear, I made him return the power stones before we left.

“Happy New Year, Yaichi. I’m glad to see you’re doing well.”

Keika pops her head out of the kitchen and gives me one of the most cookie-cutter New Year’s greetings I’ve ever heard.

“My, my. Welcome back, Father. You sure look refreshed.”

That’s how she describes Master without all those power stones jangling from his arms before going back into the kitchen with an offhanded, “Dinner’s almost ready.”

Of course, I’m angry as hell.

“Don’t *my, my* me, Keika! Ai is Did you send Ai off to Tokyo knowing that she was going to live with Mr. Natagiri?!”

“I did.”

What’s that little nod for, huh?!

“Why didn’t you tell me something that important?! If I knew, I would’ve stopped her from moving out right then and there!!”

“Calm down, Yaichi. Ai is not living with Natagiri-*sensei*, but in the room that he uses for research next door to his apartment——.”

“That’s now officially a lolicon playroom!!”

Nicknamed the Switch Hitter, Natagiri 8-*dan* is known to lure members of the Sub League, as well as college students belonging to university Shogi clubs (all men by the way), to *research* at his apartment. Their preferences don’t mean a thing to him. I was seriously worried about Ayumu when he went to one of those sessions.

Even if he never puts any moves on Ai directly, an innocent, pure grade school girl won't survive very long living in a place like that. Letting her live there is absurd!

"A grade school girl living in the same apartment as a pro Shogi player is insane!! I have to stop it! It's obvious he's after something dirty!!"

"Do you hear yourself right now, Yaichi? You're not just spitting on the heavens, you're slobbering all over them."

"I wasn't after *that*, so no harm, no foul!!"

No matter what society calls me, whatever is up there knows for a fact that I'm no lolicon!

"All I did was take a girl in grade school as a live-in apprentice, host her friends for overnight study sessions and offer to make one of them my bride! What's so wrong about that?!"

"You struck out from the first move"

"Look, I'm taking the next train to Tokyo and that's final! I have to get Ai out of there!!"

"And I'm telling you to calm down!!"

Keika, holding a square pot that looks like a *chiritori* dustpan for some reason, whacks me over the head with it just before I make a break for the door. OOOUCH!!

"Natagiri-sensei is in A division, remember? He also overcame the barrier that comes with being born in the countryside. An amazing person like that agreed to take Ai in. He even said that he'd fill in as her Master while in Tokyo!"

"Fill in as her Master?!" I retort with a laugh. "Hah! Has he ever once taken an apprentice in his life? NO! I'd really appreciate it if he didn't throw that word around like it was nothing!!"

"He's not taking it lightly. How could he when he's in the middle of the fight of his life right now?"

".....!!"

Those words stop me in my tracks.

“You realize what position Natagiri-sensei is in right now, don’t you Yaichi? *He’s fighting for his legacy.* Despite that, he kept his promise and made sure that Ai has a place to call home. Could you do that?”

“Ugh

I can’t say anything back.

If I were in Mr. Natagiri’s shoes I wouldn’t be able to go that far.

It’s not hypothetical, either. It’s because I couldn’t I neglected Ai when I was in the middle of *that*, and ended up hurting her

Keika’s offensive isn’t over.

“Even if you went, could you actually bring her back? You had your chance to force her to stay already and you couldn’t even get the words out, could you?”

“.....”

Right again I couldn’t stop Ai from leaving.

The last match we played against each other ended in a repetition draw. The option to start over was there. I had the ability to give us a clean slate and start from square one, both in that match and as Master and apprentice. Instead, I said this: *“That’s enough. It’s over.”*

And then I turned my back on her. By choice.

I’m the one who doesn’t deserve to be called Master, not Mr. Natagiri. I know that. Keika doesn’t have to spell it out for me!!

“..... Ai is in the Women’s League, but she’s still just a grade schooler. For a girl her age to be living away from her parents in Tokyo I’m worried ... so worried I can’t stand it

Her living conditions aren’t the only thing.

I’m worried that with her in the Kanto Shogi Association building, among all those pros and Women’s League players she’s never met before, she might be isolated.

I don’t doubt her skill or talent, not at all.

I’m worried *because she’s so young, skilled, talented.*

“I understand exactly where your worries are coming from, Yaichi.”

There’s a twinge of sadness in her eyes as Keika quietly continues.

“I’m a member of the Women’s League, too. I know exactly how the other women in Kanto look at Ai, painfully so And it makes me feel like a horrible person

“.....! Keika

A young, cute and extremely talented grade school girl.

Being part of the same Shogi family tree, there is no way for Keika to escape her own jealousy.

And, after watching everything that Big Sis went through, she has a better idea of what trials and tribulations are waiting for Ai than the rest of us combined.

“That was all the more reason for me to talk through every detail with Natagiri-sensei first. I saw Ai off with no doubt in my mind that everything she needed to become an outstanding Women’s League player was waiting for her on the other side.”

“I admit that working with Mr. Natagiri would help shore up Ai’s early game weaknesses, but

“That’s important, too. But I think being under the same roof as has even more merit. With those two around, I’m sure she’ll

“Huh? Keika? What are you talking——?”

Her voice drifted off in the middle of that, so I ask for clarification.

“..... Never mind. I’m more worried about you, actually” She puts her hand on my cheek and says, “You’ve lost weight, haven’t you? Are you eating right? I’m sure the food that Ai left for you is long gone by now.”

“..... I don’t feel like eating. Nothing tastes good anyway

“But you would still go for this, wouldn’t you?”

She holds up that square pan from earlier. Suddenly it clicks and I yell, “Are you making——?”

“That’s right. *Chiritori nabe!*”

Osaka is known for all sorts of food, but there’s only one that makes you feel like ¥1 million. That’s *chiritori nabe*.

“Pheeeew!! That’s hot! My stomach feels like a furnace!!”

A stew boils away in that square pot with chives and bean sprouts piled up high!

Strips of thick, fresh meat dance on the bubbles!

I pour on minced garlic and chili paste for a sweet, yet spicy kick and shovel another bite into my mouth with my chopsticks!

“Now that’s the stuff! And the meat, wow! It’s good! Seriously, *this* is Osaka in a bowl right here!”

It’s the middle of winter, but sweat is pouring down my face! Power is building deep in my gut! Warm all the way to the core!

Even my shell of a Master smiles as he wipes away the sweat and helps himself to another bowl.

“Keika. Get me another beer”

“What did I say about pacing yourself? It’s been a while since you drank,” Keika warns him, but still fills his glass with ice cold beer.

She wanted another one, too.

Eat and drink to your heart’s content and then go back for more. We devour everything, right down to the last grain of rice.

I don’t remember the last time I was this full.

“Whew. Brings back memories, doesn’t it? This flavor, this place”

The four of us would always have a hearty meal after coming back from the Shinnosai Festival. That was standard.

A square pot, one corner for each member of the family.

I loved how it lined up perfectly like that.

“It’s so hard to fill up your bowl when the pot handle is in the way. Ginko used

to grab everything from around the edges to avoid it,” Keika says to the empty spot where somebody used to be.

“And she’d put so much sauce on top of her risotto that it would bleed over into the stew, remember?!” I say to the person who isn’t here right now.

So many of my memories in Osaka revolve around *chiritori nabe*.

After Ai became my apprentice, we never really ate it at the Kiyotaki house, since there were five of us.

Part of it was because it’s easier to make more in a big, round pot, but I’m pretty sure that, in Keika’s eyes, there’s something special about four people eating it together.

“..... Dad’s become a featherweight, too.”

Master is fast asleep on the table with his glass of beer still in his hand. Keika drapes a blanket around his shoulders.

“You’ll be staying the night, won’t you, Yaichi?”

“..... No, I’ll head home. Thanks so much for dinner.”

“Oh Are you angry?”

“No, no. I just have work to do.”

Being as gentle as possible, I lie through my teeth despite the sad look in Keika’s eyes.

The truth is that I’ve already moved in with Ai Yashajin in Nishinomiya But I can’t bring myself to say so. For one thing, the possibility that Big Sis might find out through Keika is terrifying. And——.

..... I’ll never be able to go back to the room where Ai used to rush up to greet me ever again, I whisper to myself, watching my breath disappear in the cold air as I walk down the street away from Master’s place.

It’s freezing outside tonight.

No matter how I try, I’ll never have any sway over Ai Hinatsuru again.

That fact is what makes it all feel real.

It hurts just how well I understand how Master felt when he bought all those power stones at Sukunahikona Shrine.

The sting of an apprentice leaving the nest

It's out of my hands I know that. Really, I do. Still There's something I have to try

At the very least, I want to know how she is.

That, and I want to pray. Pray for her to become strong. Pray for her health. Pray for her to be happy.

"Would anyone know? Anyone at all"?

Someone I know well has the ability to check on Ai, and might know where Big Sis is and what she's up to.

"I'm sure that Master has sworn Chairman Tsukimitsu and his secretary Ms. Oga to secrecy, so there's no point asking them. The same is probably true for Shakando-sensei. Ayumu He might know about how Ai is doing, but has no idea about Big Sis. Not to mention that he's on the cusp of promoting into A division, so I'd rather not distract him"

My promotion to B-2 was set in stone before the new year started, so the rest of my matches are meaningless.

But Ayumu is in B-1. That hell is known as the Demon's Nest for a reason. They have to play against every other member of the division, so there are tons of matches. Then there's the fact that Ayumu's drive to become Meijin has been on another level since we were kids. Seriously, he refuses to let a single second go to waste. That's how he got through the Sub League in a single season and skyrocketed up the ranks by going undefeated in placement matches since then

I cross names off the list in my head one by one.

Then, once I figure out the last one, a restrained smile takes over my face.

"..... They're the only one, aren't they?" I whisper as I take out my smartphone and look through my contacts.

My last hope No, she's all I had from the start.

But that's exactly why contacting her is so scary Mess up my only chance to win, and there's nothing left to do but throw in the towel.

Thumbs trembling, I type out a message. My heart beats in my ears as my fingers go numb from the cold.

For the subject line, I go with this:

“Invitation to a Practice Session”

The addressee———Machi Kugui

RECORD 2

鹿路庭珠代

TAMAYO
ROKUROBA

山刀伐尽

JIN
NATAGIRI

THE BATTLE OF NANZENJI

The pieces are closing in from all sides. It's as if a spider were entangling me in her web.

—Haven't seen that sequence before. What could she be after

I start reading with the same intensity as a league match. Plenty of people like to experiment with new ideas during a practice session, but this sequence is timed out so perfectly that it makes me think she's spent time working on it quite a bit already.

Mid-game.

Both of us have played past our research and entered unfamiliar territory where skills called talent and instinct become more important than reading the board.

And my instinct says: go for it.

If we clash now, I think I can win. I advance to force an engagement, but—.

"Hm?!"

The web of entangled pieces bends but won't break. I can't hide my shock at just how strongly they're linked together. Is there any other Women's League player out there who can hold their own in a contest of strength against a pro during the mid-game?

"..... Strong."

My opponent must've heard that slip out of my mouth because she is smiling sweetly like she did. The glossy fabric of her kimono along with that tantalizing perfume in the air have seized control of our arena.

I'm in the middle of a match, but she is absolutely breathtaking.

"Tee-hee."

We make eye contact, and a full smile appears on her lips.

A dangerous one, too A smile that sounds the alarm. The most dangerous thing, however, is that she seems to be acutely aware of her smile's true power.

Her beauty draws me in like a magnet. I have to tear my eyes away from her to refocus back on the board.

If I didn't that beautiful smile would completely take over my train of thought

"Pardon me," I say and remove my jacket. Even though it's January, my whole body is soaked with sweat.

I start peeling back my opponent's advance bit by bit.

All the while, she is stripping my formation down like ripping away layers of clothing. How vexing.

Momentum ebbs and flows like waves, our defenses tremble with every blow.

"..... Ah"

I'm not sure who took that breath. Our formations collide yet again, pieces melding together on a board that has dissolved into one single entity.

Bursts of ecstasy surge through my brain with every second that ticks by. The kind of late-game that devours everything on the board is underway. Her breathing is just as ragged as mine.

Seeing my chance, I take all the power that I have been building up and unleash it in one final blow!!

"Whew I have been defeated," my opponent for this practice session——Yamashiro Ouka Machi Kugui says after a long, deep breath and bows her head. Then she makes eye contact one more time and says, "This satisfaction is unparalleled.≡ Obligated for the Shogi match, Ryuo-san."

After our review session, Machi bows her head again.

"Aye, my apologies for requesting that you come to Nanzenji Temple."

"Don't worry. I'm the one who asked for a practice session in the first place."

With that, I bow back to her. I've still got adrenaline pumping through my veins after going all out Intense.

Nanzenji Temple.

If someone were to ask where Kyoto's Shogi roots run deepest, this is the place. The strongest players of 60 to 70 years ago began a series of memorable matches that is called the Nanzenji Wars. People still talk about those battles to this day.

"Though I'm surprised we ended up at this upscale inn next to the temple, I was sure we were going to be playing in a building on the grounds"

"As there are places within Zen temples to which my gender is denied entrance."

"Ah, I forgot. Women still aren't allowed inside these older temples."

Temples tend to be the go-to places to stay for overnight Shogi practice sessions, and Machi and I went on one back when we were in elementary school. So I just assumed we'd be doing that again this time, too.

"And, never in my wildest dreams did I think you'd be wearing a kimono! Seriously, a kimono at a practice session?! Don't you think you got a bit too psyched up?!"

"Te-he-he. As New Year's events are numerous, I nary have the chance to take it off."

W-Well, that's what it's like to be born into nobility People would stop and stare at beautiful women dressed in elaborate kimonos walking down the street in any other city, but seeing one during New Year's just feels right in Kyoto.

Machi stands up and twirls in place.

"Well? Does it suit me?"

"Sure, it does."

"Would you be so kind as to give me applicable feedback?!"

This bombshell of a Kyoto beauty pouting and puffing out her cheeks makes my heart leap. Adorable

"Be sure to observe me in great detail, would you not?"

A woman who has been watching me no, watching my Shogi for years and years jokes.

It turns out that it's been snowing outside and I only just now noticed. A soft, sparkly white blanket covers the landscape as far as the eye can see. Tranquility fills the air.

—..... The timing should be about right.

Slipping my arms back into the jacket I took off, I fix my posture.

"I must admit when I invited you to this practice session I did have an ulterior motive."

"..... Oooh?"

Machi's eyes narrow as if sizing me up. Her aura changes so fast, it's like she flipped a switch.

The woman in front of me isn't Machi the Tormentor anymore, but her other face.

"I'd like to ask you a favor."

"Pertaining to?"

"You'll play against Ai, right? In the Women's Legend League. When you do I'd like you to tell me how she's doing. If she's her usual self or not And, um"

"If she's being persecuted in Tokyo, yes?"

"....."

"I don't mind in the least. As I am curious about Ai myself. Not to mention that I have been asked for a similar favor by both Ayano and Charlette already."

"They have, huh"

Ayano Sadatou is Machi's younger sister apprentice.

Her friends suddenly disappearing one by one must've hit her hard. Plus, it was looking like Charlette was going to join the Practice League with me as her Master, but I called it off. We haven't spoken since.

It's my responsibility to resolve the situation. Right now, though—.

"Was that the only favor you wished to ask of me, Ryuo-san?"

"No There's one more."

She asked me as if she already knows what it is.

And, judging by that tone she already knows the answer?! My brain kicks into overdrive, and I have to will my voice to remain steady as I play my next move. My approach.

“Do you know where my older sister apprentice is right now?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

Shot down using no time.

My vision goes black in an instant. My spirit shatters more completely than in any Shogi loss and more thoroughly than I thought possible I can't even stand up.

“I I see”

Then, as if toying with my emotions, Machi continues, “However, I do possess several promising leads.”

“!! You do?!”

I reach out and grab Machi's delicate shoulders like a drowning man desperately grabbing for a tree branch overhead.

“Do you really?! Do you actually have an idea where Ginko——”

“Ow”

“Ah! S-Sorry I lost myself for a second”

Her eyes begrudgingly glued to my hands as I let go, she says, “Leads, yes. Though I cannot make any guarantees, I do believe them to be quite promising Just my intuition speaking, of course.”

“That's plenty! Even just showing the way is enough!!”

A single star shining in the night sky. That's what it feels like right now.

At last I can move forward. Just those few words were all it took

“That being said, the Women's Legend League has reached a fever pitch and I must defend my title of Yamashiro Ouka come spring. I have neither the time nor the energy to partake in a wild goose chase especially when said wild goose has hurt me in the past.”

“.....”

“Therefore, I shall name my condition.”

“C-Condition? Sure, anything As long as it’s in my power, just name it”

No sooner are those words out of my mouth than Machi slides open the door to the next room.

“This—is my condition.”

“Is that?!”

My whole body starts burning up the second I see what’s behind the door.

There’s a white, fluffy, square *thing* right there—.

MAIDENHOOD

It is as white as virgin snow.

Pure white and smooth as a whistle, *it* is softly shaking back and forth.

I reach out for the silky white goodness and grab it.

Hot!

And so soft.

It's a brand-new sensation Like the moment a boy becomes a man. I can't keep this feeling bottled up anymore and yell.

"Boiled tofu is sooo GOOOOOOOOOOOD!!"

"But, of course. Nanzenji is the place for tofu dishes."

This is what Machi had prepared in the next room.

A big pot—full of tofu.

"I have such a profound fondness for boiled tofu, so much so that one could say that I love it.≡" Machi confesses as her cheeks turned a rosy red.

As for me, I'm not sure if I should be happy or disappointed about this anticlimactic turn.

"I have to say, when you threw open the doors, I was sure you were after I mean, I had no clue what you had in mind and panicked a bit!"

"Te-he-he. As it is most embarrassing to dine on stew by one's lonesome, your invitation was quite the timely windfall, Ryuo-san."

I've heard about how good Kyoto's tofu is but the rumors don't do it justice.

"I've always thought of tofu as something that's just kind of there. This, though ... I never knew tofu could have so much rich flavor"

The *chiritori nabe* I had at Master's place was good, but compared to this, it tasted dirt cheap.

"Kyoto's winters are rather frigid. Hot tofu is the perfect remedy for cold,

snowy nights. Not to mention Kyoto's pristine groundwater and abundance of temples that only serve to work in its favor."

"Temples? Why does having a bunch of old temples around make the food taste better?"

"Monks in old temples such as this one were strictly vegetarian. Tofu was an invaluable source of protein without meat or fish in their diet. Thus, within walking distance of centuries-old temples——."

"There are tofu shops that date back just as long! I get it now."

Tofu's flavor isn't the only thing that has been polished through the years.

It seems that etiquette unique to Kyoto has evolved along with it——.

"When boiling tofu, too much heat will cause it to melt. The precise temperature to enjoy a hot, yet fluffy texture is Now! At 70° centigrade!"

Machi takes the pot off the flame just as little bubbles start coming to the surface. The little bloop make it look like it's dancing. I've never seen Machi be particular about anything, but she's not letting me anywhere near the pot.

Well, that's fine by me!

As far as work goes, watching the sleeves of the kimono-clad beauty sway back and forth on the other side of the steam is as easy as it gets!

"Please indulge.♪"

"You don't have to tell me twice!"

She hands me a bowl filled to the brim with hot tofu. I scoop out a bite with a wooden spoon and slurp it up. Even the sweet bean paste she added as a secret ingredient adds a nice touch.

"Whew Good stuff. And I mean really good"

A waterfall of warmth cascades down my throat and spreads out all the way to my fingers and toes.

It's like I'm tasting it with my whole body wow.

"Haaa What bliss!≡" says Machi like she's found true love.

"I beg your pardon. It seems I have donned too many layers of clothing and

become a might bit hot Haaaaah. Much too hot

“?!”

I watch, stunned, as Machi loosens the folds of her kimono and starts fanning herself.

The space between her own luscious bowls of boiled tofu comes in view
Th-the jiggle

Just as the urge to ask for seconds hits, Machi licks a bit of sweet bean paste off her spoon and asks, “What was it we were discussing before?”

“O-Oh! Right! What’s your condition for helping me track down Big Sis? What do you want me to do?”

I doubt it’s joining her for a boiled tofu dinner.

“To be completely honest, I have had a request for you for quite some time now, Ryuo-san.”

“Request? What kind?”

“..... Your maidenhood

“Huh?”

“Give me your maidenhood, Ryuo-san!”

“..... Say what?”

Machi then rolls up her long, black hair into a bun and slides a long hairpin through to keep it in place. Sitting up straight, she tells me exactly what she wants.

A condition I never saw coming.

“Would you publish a Shogi book?”

“A book?”

I didn’t understand what she meant right away.

It took a few moments of me mulling those words over to finally connect the dots.

“A Shogi book Wait?! Y-You want me to write one?!”

“I believe you are more than worthy, almost overqualified, to do so. You have multiple titles to your name, which includes a defense of the Dragon King Ryuo title. Now is the perfect time to pen your maiden release.”

“Well You have a point.”

I’m still in the news because of my second title, and the leagues are starting to reset so I don’t have as many matches to play.

“But why haven’t you said anything until now? We spoke almost every day last year when I was going for my second title.”

“A sense of timing is vital for an editor.”

Machi, now speaking as the journalist Mato, explains her reasoning.

“Editors who act when the idea strikes them will only ever be third rate. We must be constantly on the alert for miraculous timing where the author’s and publisher’s availability lines up before broaching the subject. Only then can an editor be considered a leader in the field Or so my boss claims.”

“Sounds like Shogi to me,” I say before I realize it.

You can’t just launch an attack when you feel like it in Shogi, either. It’s important to keep a close eye on what your opponent is doing at all times.

Not that the opponent ever likes being attacked! Shogi’ll bring out your dark side real quick.

“So? What kind of book do you want me to write?”

“The publisher is hoping to tap into your extensive knowledge and skills pertaining to young girls with an introductory level book designed for——.”

“FORGET IT!!”

What extensive knowledge and skills, huh?! What do they take me for?!

“I expected you would say as much. Thus, I personally would like a book filled with advanced strategy and insight, Kuzuryu-*sensei*.”

“..... Specifically?”

“The easiest to produce would be commentary on your own matches. That would include not only title matches, but records of matches that you feel

particularly strongly about.”

I see, I see.

“Slightly more difficult would be a book on strategy. Such publications from top Shogi players sell very well. The Ranging Rook aficionado Oishi 9-*dan*’s Maestro Series, including Gokigen Central Rook Maestro and Fourth-File Rook Maestro have made the bestseller list. Just recently, Kannabe 7-*dan*’s book pertaining to *yagura* strategies sold extremely well with the female demographic once his photograph was included on the sleeve.”

I think a different audience is buying Ayumu’s book

“I would love to read your views on strategy, Kuzuryu-*sensei*!”

“But my two main ones are the Double Wing Attack and Move-Loss Bishop Exchange”

Bishop Exchanges are really complicated and figuring out how to force a repetition draw is a viable strategy. It’s like a clinch in boxing.

It’s not flashy and there are a lot of sequences to memorize, so I doubt the average Shogi fan would be interested at all.

“As for the Double Wing Attack, it’s become more standardized thanks to software, but those are mostly just for pros”

“Indeed, the material may be too advanced for amateurs to understand. Consider that from a different angle, however, and you will find that advanced strategy as a genre is severely lacking. I believe there is more opportunity there than you think.”

“Hmmm”

“In that case, Kuzuryu-*sensei*, what type of book do you believe will sell?”

“Well, let me think. For one——.”

Just then A question somebody asked me pops into my head.

“Mr. Kuzuryu, how do you use software?”

It’s actually been on my mind ever since the young player nicknamed The Translator asked me.

So, I offhandedly say, “Software seems to be the popular way to do research these days, so what about a book on that?”

“Yes!!”

Huh?

“That is a fantastic idea! Everyone, not just Shogi fans, would be interested to learn how A.I. became the driving force behind the youngest title holder in history who fended off the Meijin! Plus, as you have taken a title from the foremost expert on Shogi software, Yo Okito, you are now the most knowledgeable person when it comes to applying it, Kuzuryu-sensei! A book written by such a player would surely revolutionize the Shogi world!!”

“D-Do you think so? So, I have a talent for writing as well as Shogi?!”

“All too easy.”

“Hm? Did you just say I’m easy?”

“I merely felt that someone who comes up with such great ideas so easily will be able to write a book that flies off the shelves, that is all.”

“Right?! I’ve also secretly thought that I could write a bestseller if I just sat down and wrote one! For some reason, I’ve never gotten any offers”

To be completely honest I’ve been jealous of other players putting out books left and right, and it’s made me antsy to the point that I hide Ayumu’s book behind others at the association’s bookshop

“But it turns out there are people who’d read mine! I thought that you’d be the perfect editor for me if I wrote one, so I’m ecstatic that you asked me!!”

“.....! Yai- Ryuo-san≡”

Machi, back to her usual self in the blink of an eye, smiles at me.

But a wave of dread hits me right away. A book

“I never went to high school I don’t read all that much either. Do you think I can pull it off?”

“Have no fear, Sensei.” Machi gently pats my knees and says, “That is a Shogi writer’s time to shine. I, an expert in Shogi and publishing, will be here to provide full and continuous support each step of the way.”

“Huh?! Shogi journalists do that kind of work, too?!”

“Only a select few Shogi writers can put food on the table staying on the Shogi beat alone. Many work for the broadcasting staff, have multiple part-time jobs or earn money in other fields of journalism.”

“Oh yeah. You work for one of those town magazines, don’t you, Machi?”

“In fact, today’s excursion doubles as research for a piece I’m doing entitled Nanzenji, the Perfect Couples’ Getaway!”

Man, she doesn’t miss an opportunity, does she?

“Well? What does an editor providing full and continuous support for a pro player actually do?”

“Comprehending the professional player’s words and transcribing them to paper, creating graphs and charts and filling in holes as necessary.”

“So: a ghost writer?”

“It’s editing support.”

“No, that’s ghost writing.”

“Editing support.”

“E- editing support”

“Yes. Editing support.”

The overwhelming aura of the Shogi-playing writer wins out.

It feels like I’ve learned yet another dirty secret of the adults in this world

“The writer who assisted the Meijin in publishing his book of strategies earned enough money to build their own house.”

“That book, too?!”

Big Sis, Ayumu and I must’ve read that thing front to back hundreds of times back when we were in training.

Writing a book when he’s so busy, he really must be a god! I was convinced back then. So, this was the trick to it

“There is no telling how many years it would require a top Shogi player to

write out a book in their own words while they are so busy. Even if the book is high quality, it will be worthless the moment they lose their title. No one wants a loser's advice. What's more, the tending strategies could change if publication is delayed too long. Timing is everything."

After getting that far, Machi hesitates for a moment and says.

"And While I do not want to intrude, I believe having something to pull your attention away from Ginko Sora would be the best thing for you at the moment. A separate kind of work that will engage your mind."

".....! What's that supposed to mean?"

"Those wrinkles in your forehead weren't there before. And your cheeks are perfectly smooth. You haven't smiled once today, have you?"

Wow She really does watch me closely

"Why are you going this far to help me? Everyone else goes away, calls me a monster But not you, Machi Why do you see me as a human being?"

"Because I have watched you grow. I knew Yaichi Kuzuryu the boy. And——"

Machi puts my heart on a check path.

"While I can't make any guarantees with Ginko Sora, I can deliver your book directly to Ai Hinatsuru. If there is anything you had yet to teach her, this book would be the best way to do so. Don't you agree?"

"That's the pick-up line that seals the deal, isn't it?"

"As in Shogi, it is best to hide your ace in the hole until the very last moment."

With that, my first editor gives me a kind smile.

"Having that ability is a condition for being a good editor as well."

THE HYPERBOLIC TIME CHAMBER

“What are you after here?”

I get in Jin-Jin’s face after pulling him into his own apartment.

As for the encroacher, Shorty Ai Hinatsuru, she’s waiting in my room (that is NOT about to change!) for the time being. I told her to sit and wait on her ankles with my iciest voice.

“Just what I said. Ai is my research partner. She said she wanted to transfer to Kanto, and I took her in.”

“As a research partner? Sure you did.”

I’m not dumb.

I mean, who’s ever heard of an A division Shogi professional accepting an elementary school student, let alone a girl, as their research partner? ’Cuz I sure haven’t!

“What could a top player who did research with the Meijin himself possibly learn from a little girl? A university student like me is one thing, but what do you get out of keeping Shorty as your pet? Nothing, right?”

“It slips my mind every now and then, but You are currently enrolled in university, aren’t you? Care to remind me what you’re majoring in?”

“School of Political Science and Economics, I’ll have you know.”

The poli-sci department at my school, W-University, is famous for putting students through their paces.

I took entrance exams to get in and passed with flying colors. That’s right, I got in on brains alone. Men tend to be intimidated by intelligent women, so I don’t come out and say it. Jin-Jin isn’t like that in the first place, so the two of us are playing off it like this.

“Well then, as a student of political science and economics, are you familiar with the Leapfrog Phenomenon?”

“That’s when an underdeveloped country grows so quickly that it overtakes a

developed country in no time at all, yes? You see it all the time in technology fields these days.”

“Exactly. The Meijin’s so-called Highway Theory fits into that category. By traveling the path laid out by those who came before, the younger generation can grow faster by comparison.”

“Then why couldn’t anyone in your generation surpass the Meijin, hmm?”

“That’s true in terms of results. For now.”

It’s not like him to emphasize things, but that for now: that had some power behind it. He never stopped smiling, though.

“If a Stage Skip would take place, however, even the Meijin would get left behind by the times.”

“Skip?”

“A specific example would be what happens when cellular phones sell like mad in a country that never had landlines.”

“Ohh Cellphone sales surpass the more advanced countries in one giant leap because there aren’t any other options in a country so young. I think I see what you’re getting at.”

They skipped over the phone-on-the-wall phase.

In Shogi terms, would that be like somebody learning from software first without ever having a person teach them? I’ve heard that new 4-*dan* Sota Kunugi is like that.

“And then, once the digital payment options become available to the masses? That’s a whole new realm of techniques opening up right there.”

“..... So, you’re saying that something like online payment apps is happening in Shogi right now?”

“Beats me. I have no idea.”

“If you don’t know, then——.”

“Even if new techniques were being discovered, *I have no way of realizing their advantage.*”

He wouldn't realize it?

Why not?

"I use a smartphone, but I never intend to use one of those digital wallets no matter how popular they become. I'll stick to cash, thank you. Reason being, I'd be up a creek without a paddle if my phone ever ran out of battery."

"Ah!"

It's because they don't know the techniques of the past, because they don't know where that knowledge came from, that underdeveloped countries focus only on the latest techniques as they build themselves up in cycles.

That could cause fatal errors at any point.

But they don't stay down for long. They adjust to new circumstances and keep coming up with new ideas and techniques. All of this happens at breakneck speed.

"I've studied the early-game far too much. I can't just ignore the past and build on new techniques like Ai can."

The game has changed.

Jin-Jin says that we're on the verge of a new era where all the rules and knowledge we have now won't apply to the new generation.

"Not even the Meijin can escape from that."

"Wh-What makes you so sure? Knowing him, he'll put his own spin on whatever new strategies come up and find a way to beat them——."

"Yes. The Meijin doesn't take software strategies as they are and always, always adds his own flavor. That's why——."

"Wh-Why what?"

"That's why he'll never be able to use software effectively," Jin-Jin says with a look cold enough to send chills down my spine.

".....!!"

Jin-Jin blurts out the weakness of his Savior, the one who selected him to be their research partner.

“You asked me what I’m after, didn’t you? It’s to have Ai living next door to me,” he continues with his eyes just as frigid. “As far as I’m concerned, there’s nothing but upsides. Ai’s ability to calculate exceeds more than half of all professional Shogi players. Her late-game skills alone are clearly on par with A division players, if not superior to them.”

He’s being serious.

But who’d believe that?

I won’t deny that there are some Women’s League players who can beat professionals. Ika Sainokami has. She’s crazy good, and pretty crazy all around. She’s picking up victory stars in Group 6 at the Ryuo League Tournament. With all the momentum she’s got built up right now, I wouldn’t be surprised if she ended up in the Final Tournament.

The only reason she can do that, though, is because Group 6 is filled with new rookie professionals who just promoted and passed-their-prime geezers who’ve fallen down from higher placements. It’s the weakest group in the whole tournament.

A division players, with the exception of the Meijin, are the strongest ten Shogi players on the planet.

And he expects me to believe that a little girl who’s stronger in the late-game than any of them exists?

Heck no. Don’t make me laugh.

“Mitsuru told me the most interesting tidbit about Ai. According to him, she has eleven mental Shogi boards! And all eleven of them are probably clicking on all cylinders right now. If any new, never-before-seen strategies or techniques were to pop up the first one to use them would be——.”

So, basically, Jin-Jin sees Shorty like some kind of pet frog.

A tiny little frog hopping around in her cage.

He’s going to pick up whatever that frog spits out. Even if she doesn’t come up with anything at all, he’ll feel safe because he can keep an eye on her

“In fact, my performance in big matches has improved by leaps and bounds ever since I started doing practice sessions with Ai online Yes? It’s thanks to

her that this chance is in my grasp. I'm not picky about what I have to do to win."

That absolute determination to overtake his longtime research partner leaves me speechless. His desire for strength has turned into an obsession.

"Didn't you once say that you wanted someone closer to your age to play Shogi with nearby? I think Ai would fit the bill perfectly."

"Cut that out That's from back when I was still living in Numazu, right? When I was in junior high."

All that leapfrog stuff didn't make much sense, but after hearing Jin-Jin talk like this, I got a very clear image of what he wants.

The Hyperbolic Time Chamber.

That room in Dragon Ball where you can train your heart out.

Inside that room, you can get in a whole year's worth of training in a single day on the outside.

The gravity is ten times stronger, too. The air is thin. There is nothing else fun to do other than train.

Jin-Jin wants to turn my comfortable and perfectly situated room into his own personal hyperbolic time chamber.

I just can't put up with this.

▲ ATONEMENT

“So, you seriously think you’re going to live here, do you?”

After my little talk with Jin-Jin wraps up — he told me to return the key and get out, but I flat out refused — I go back to the research room and ask the little girl directly.

Now that I look around, the room was nowhere near this clean this morning

I’ve been so busy lately that there hasn’t been time to clean or organize anything. Not only is everything spic-and-span, but the little girl has made us space so she can sleep on the floor

“..... Yeah, you’re serious alright.”

She’s sitting on her ankles in the corner of the room and looking up at me, cute but looking more determined than ever.

She seemed a lot less sure of herself back when we played our match I’d hate to have to play her now.

“Um I thought just sitting here would be a waste of time, so I decided to do some cleaning. I’m sorry for not asking your permission——.”

“Is this how you did it last time? When you convinced Kuzuryu-sensei to let you move in?”

“.....!”

Shorty’s whole body twitches at once.

Then she locks eyes with me. They’re pulsing with a mixture of anger and sadness.

Hah! Now those are good eyes.

Show me more. Show me what you are on the inside.

“Jin-Jin may have given you the green light, I certainly haven’t.”

That’s right. I’m not convinced.

There's something I need to know first.

"If you're thinking this is your shot to become Jin-Jin's apprentice, you have my condolences. He's an A division player who researches with the Meijin, but he has no clout whatsoever. The Meijin and Jin-Jin have distanced themselves from it. On top of that, he doesn't take apprentices in the first place. So——."

"I only have one Master."

Well, that was fast.

Quiet, too, but strong enough to cut me off. That kind of conviction won't waiver no matter what anyone says or does, ever.

It's solid, like a Pawn-anchored Gold, and I end up getting knocked down a peg trying to bowl her over.

"Th- Then why did you leave that Master's apartment in the first place? Well, being a live-in apprentice at all was pretty bizarre So, yeah, I get moving out. But was it really necessary to transfer, too?"

Didn't you run away?

Aren't you trying to find a safe place to hole up in all by yourself? Looking for someone else to protect you?

Because that's how it looks to everyone else no matter what you say. They'll start giving Jin-Jin and me crap if you get us mixed up in this. Just stay away. Move out, now.

Of course, it wouldn't feel right to be that direct with her, so I attack from a different angle.

I'm a grown up, but I don't play fair.

"Look, you being here causes nothing but trouble. I'm this close to challenging for my first title, ever. You are in the same league, battling for the same title, remember? Don't you think it'll look weird, us living together? I don't want to put up with that."

"But, Rokuroba-sensei, we've already played against each other I lost, too"

"But you've got matches left against my opponents. Can you say without a

shadow of a doubt that it won't matter?"

"..... Well"

League matches come down to one thing: victory stars. Hypothetically speaking, Shorty losing on purpose could go a long way to determining the challenger.

She could fix a match if she wanted to.

All the final matches in the Women's Legend League take place on the same day to prevent stuff like that from happening, though.

"And one more thing——."

I'm not showing mercy to this silent little girl.

"Jin-Jin is in the middle of his first title match in four years. Monarch, in case you didn't know. Any guesses who he's playing against?"

"..... The Meijin."

"That's right. It's his second time going up against that god among mortals, who still has four of the seven titles to his name. Jin-Jin got swept last time, but it's much closer this time around He needs space right now so he can focus on himself."

"I know I know that I'm a bother," says the little girl, biting down on her lip as she squeezes the words out. "But! Natagiri-sensei was the one who invited me——."

"Because he can't say no to a student. Jin-Jin is too friendly for his own good anyway."

I know that better than anyone.

He's the kind of guy who'll just give a girl her own room and teach her Shogi without anything in it for him or wanting something extra on the side.

I don't believe anything he said about that leapfrog thing from earlier.

If any elementary school student were going to spark a revolution in the Shogi world, I think it be Sota Kunugi 4-*dan*

Because I know for certain that a Women's League player will never have that

much impact.

“..... I”

Shorty doesn't take her eyes off the floor but clenches her fist.

On her skirt, too. She's squeezing the hem like a woman on a mission right now. At this rate, she'll never get the wrinkles out.

“Hey, you'll need to iron——.”

It hits me just as I say those words.

Even back when we bumped into each other at Sendagaya Station, the right side of her skirt was already wrinkled to high heaven.

I've seen wrinkles that deep once before.

——Just like Ginko Sora's.

The first time I played against her in the Women's League match it was the Queen Tournament Preliminaries. That was our one and only league match.

Back then, Ginko Sora was an elementary school fifth grader.

The same age as Ai, the little girl sitting on her ankles in front of me right now——.

“I have to be strong.”

“.....”

That answer is the same, too.

I, who got owned by her in popularity and in Shogi, asked the already Sub League member Ginko Sora a question during our review session.

“Why did you bother playing in the Women's League tournament?”

Ai Hinatsuru just said the exact same words that Ginko Sora said to me that day. I can practically see the two elementary school girls overlap before my eyes.

So I follow up. This girl might actually give me an answer.

I ask what I couldn't that day.

“Say you get strong, what then?”

“.....”

The girl squeezes her skirt even tighter.

And—.

“..... I don’t know. I don’t but—.”

That little voice trembles. It’s so meek that I have to lean closer just to hear her.

However, her words cut right through me.

“A path will open up if I’m strong.”

The elementary school girl then puts both her hands on the floor.

“So please, let me stay here! I understand that I’m being selfish! I understand that that’s not an answer! But BUT!!”

—No, that’s an answer alright.

She leans so far forward her forehead hits the floor.

“Please!” says the little girl looking up for a moment before putting her head back on the floor.

She keeps this loop going like a broken record, and part of me is surprisingly convinced.

Ginko Sora would say the same thing, I’m sure of it. She’s just that straightforward.

That and her answer put me into this prostrating little girl’s shoes.

Because, well no one can get stronger while having fun here in the Shogi world.

A path that only opens up when you’re strong.

—That’s the most painful one there is.

This girl is ... what? Ten, eleven years old? And here she is: her first step down the path she knows will cause her worlds of pain. Those little unsteady

feet are still trying to push forward.

While shouldering all the hate directed at her Shogi family tree.

“A path will open Heh.”

Total honesty, I figured it out long ago.

Realized that this girl isn't running away.

She's drifting through Kanto, soaked to the bone in the hate and malice raining down on her in a place where no one will be an umbrella and wound up here. Every single member of the Women's League knew the meaning behind her cutting off the hair that she used to love so much. That includes me.

Wow, I seem really pathetic all of a sudden, don't I?

I played a normal match of Shogi against her in the Women's Legend League and won.

Knowing that your opponent is down is no reason not to kick them with all your might. We earn money by getting fans to watch our matches and look at our records. Holding back isn't an option.

But, you know?

As her senior, I could've gone up to her before the match and asked her how she was, couldn't I?

Did I draw the line in the sand so we wouldn't get close? Yeah, I might've.

But I could've stepped up for her after I won when all those other Women's players were pouring salt on her fresh wounds, yeah? What did I do? I laughed along with them because I was afraid of sticking out too much, didn't I?

“I'm trash.”

Despite riding the wave that Ginko Sora created, everyone was bashing her behind the scenes because no one could win a title with her around.

The Queen and Women's Throne League turned into a complete snooze fest because she was too strong. That was why the popularity of Women's Shogi was in a nosedive. That's what they all claimed without seeing the weakness in the mirror.

After Ginko was allowed to keep her titles when she turned professional, like she won a game of rock-paper-scissors by putting out her sign two seconds late, pretty much everyone was saying she should just die like it was nothing.

So, when she lost to Ika Sainokami and immediately went on medical leave, everyone acted concerned while jumping for joy on the inside.

Once the Ginko Sora brand disappeared, though, the remaining Women's League players were faced with the hard truth that they can't keep the leagues going on their own. They're anxious, panicking — desperate to blame anyone else for the situation.

And now, a little girl from Ginko Sora's extended Shogi family tree is prostrating herself on the floor in front of me. Full-blown *dogeza*.

C'mon Cut that out.

We are the ones who should be on the floor right now.

— Atonement.

That word comes to mind.

"..... Meh, whatever. They already hate me anyway."

"Huh?"

The little girl sounds confused as she looks up at me without raising her head.

I don't mean to brag, but I can say with the utmost confidence that other women hate my guts. After all, I was the fan favorite until Ginko showed up.

That means that I've got the least to lose by taking in Shorty.

Plus, Jin-Jin can focus if I'm the one looking after her.

"I was here first, so the chores are your responsibility," I declare with as much oomph as I can muster. "Of course, what I say goes around here. That's the condition."

"?! Then, I——?"

"Yes or no?"

Pop! The elementary school girl is up on her knees like a little meerkat in the blink of an eye, but I keep up the pressure. She won't be living in the lap of

luxury, I'll see to that.

"Y-Yes! I'll do anything you say if you let me stay here!!"

"Oooh? You said anything just now, didn't you?"

"Anything within reason, please!!"

If we're going to do this, I'm going to get as much out of it as I can. Plans for my roommate start coming together in my head at the speed of light. There's so much I want to do.

LADY AI SETS A CURFEW

“Welcome home, Master! Where were you, I wonder?”

After thoroughly enjoying Nanzenji’s famous boiled tofu and landing a new gig writing my maiden release, I feel like I’m walking on clouds as I come back to my new apartment. My apprentice is waiting for me at the door with an all-knowing grin on her face.

Ahhh This brings back memories

Yep. This kind of thing happened all the time with Ai Hinatsuru at the old apartment

Nostalgia washes over me as I focus as hard as I can to keep my voice steady and maintain eye contact.

“A-A practice session”

“A practice session. I see.”

Ai Yashajin nods deeply with that smile still plastered on her face. She then tilts her head like a cute little angel.

“And? You must’ve gone pretty far since you’re getting back so late. Where did you go?”

“Ky- Kyoto”

“Kyoto! That is pretty far. I wonder, what top-level Shogi player could possibly convince a dual title holder to go all the way out to Kyoto for a practice session, hmm?”

“Um i-it was with Machi Kugui, but she insisted that we have a true Kyoto dish afterward, so we stopped at a famous inn to have boiled tofu. They even had *tatami* rooms. And——.”

“A futon laid out in the room next door.”

“NO!! We played Shogi and had dinner, that’s all!!”

Even I started doubting my memory for a second there, so I shout my rebuttal to convince us both.

“Is that true?”

“Y-..... Yes. It’s true!”

I’m not lying. So it’s true. If I’m not lying, then it must be true

“.....”

Ai crosses her arms while staring me straight in the eyes. Then she leans in for a whiff (I don’t smell like anything, but she has some kind of sweet perfume on) and uncrosses her arms before saying.

“I don’t care. You can have women on the side if you want.”

“Um, what”?

That’s not something a grade schooler should say, and all I did was have a practice session with Machi. Not to mention that Ai Yashajin isn’t my wife or my lover. We’re just Shogi Master and apprentice.

“Look, I don’t like being restrained either. Both of us are the type to prioritize work over a social life, and I don’t get jealous like Ai Hinatsuru and Ginko Sora do.”

There are so many comments I’d like to make about what she just said that I don’t know where to start.

But her face is 100 percent serious as she points directly between my eyes and declares, “However! You’re only allowed to stay out for matches or work. Otherwise, you will be eating here every night. Your curfew will be, Yes, 9 o’clock sounds about right.”

“Say whaaat?! 9 o’clock?! What am I, a teenage girl?!”

My curfew back at Master’s place wasn’t even that strict.

“Actually, I should be the one who decides *your* curfew! What gives you the right to set *mine*, huh?! Who is whose Master?!”

“Look over there.”

Ai juts her chin toward the kitchen.

There, sitting at a table with food piled high in the dark kitchen, is a maid mumbling to herself

“All of those hours at a hot stove All of those hours at a hot stove All of this food All of it made just for you All that time, all that effort, all of it

“Dah! Sorry, Akira! I’ll eat it all! I’ll eat it all and enjoy every single bite!!”

So now I have a 9 o’clock curfew.

RECORD 3

花立薊
(過去)

AZAMI
HANADACHI
(PAST)

花立薊
(現在)

AZAMI
HANADACHI
(PRESENT)

PRO WOMEN'S PLAYER

“Shorty. Starting now, think of me as your Master and do exactly as I say. If I say something is black, you say it’s black, too, even if it’s white. Clear?”

We’re having breakfast on our first day as roommates.

I munch on the food that Ai Hinatsuru whipped up (tasty, very tasty) as I lay down the law.

Shorty doesn’t seem to get the picture.

“U-Um I’m happy that you agreed to let me stay, but I only have one Master

“I’m saying that I’ll teach you the ins and outs of surviving as a female Shogi player in the metropolis! Be grateful, shut up and learn.”

I know that people call me the Practice Session Crusher behind my back, but they have another name for me that I rather like.

It’s Pro Women’s Player.

Well, it’s supposed to be a put-down. You know, in a professional girlfriend kind of way. I realize they’re trying to insult me.

But, like I said before, I like it.

“I’ve got a gig today doing instructional matches for a company’s Shogi club. It’s Saturday, so you don’t have school, right? Make sure you don’t burn the apartment down.”

Keeping my makeup to a minimum, because that’s what geezers typically like, I slip on a slightly low-necked top and issue Shorty my orders for today.

“There’ll be a delivery today, so listen for the intercom.”

“A delivery? What kind——?”

“From an online grocery store. When you get as busy as I am, that’s how you cut down on shopping time. Make dinner out of whatever’s in the box.”

“It’d be cheaper to go to the supermarket. I can go——.”

“Don’t bother with it.”

I cut her off with my no back talk tone.

“I’ll get the ingredients squared away, you cook them up and make them look good. Clear?”

“..... Yes. I understand.”

Shorty doesn’t look happy about it, but she nods. Atta girl.

“Oh, and don’t forget to take a few pics when everything’s ready. ☆”

“Uwhee? Why would you want pictures?”

“To put on Instagram and Twitter, of course. It checks all the boxes: we can cook, we’re best friends and are totally single. That’s the basics of the basics.”

“What’s the point in doing all that?”

“Talismans. Digital talismans.”

Posting day in and day out like that protects you from grudges and jealousy that others have toward you. I’m totally a digital shaman, aren’t I?

“Once that goes viral, I’ll have you take cooking videos, too. Bye now!”

“Ah! Great move~! I just might have to borrow that in a league match sometime. ☆”

My job for today: do instructional matches for a huge company’s Shogi club.

I landed this gig because one of the execs who organized this event also used to belong to my university’s Shogi club. Since pretty much all the members of this club were active in the student Shogi scene at one point, some of them are stronger than Women’s League players.

Of course, I wouldn’t lose to them if we were playing for real because they’ve got a huge blank spot in their Shogi history, but yeah.

“Rokuroba-sensei, thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule for us today.”

We’re having dinner at a restaurant after finishing my lessons for the day.

Businessmen at big companies like these are blessed with the kind of financial

stability that Shogi professionals can only dream about. They can splurge when they want.

Here they all are, smiling as they compliment me on my recent winning streak and paying for dinner on top of my instruction fee.

“10 league wins in a row, and the Women’s Legend front-runner. You can almost taste that first title at last, can’t you?”

“No, no! That’s still a ways off

“Our university has produced plenty of Shogi professionals and Women’s League players, including two of the past Meijin Title Holders. However, not even a single alumna has held a Women’s title. Heck, there hasn’t even been a challenger. I’m hoping that I’m looking at the first one no, the first Women’s Title Holder right now.”

“Oh, thaaank you! ☆ Tamayon’ll do her best!”

On paper, I *am* sensei.

I’m *teaching* Shogi in exchange for money. Students should be *rooting* for their teacher to succeed.

But I, and everyone else here, know that’s not the status quo.

That’s what working means for a Women’s Shogi player. ☆

“I come home from work, and what do I find? Look! My roommate Ai Hinatsuru made the most delicious dinner I’ve ever seen! A Shogi powerhouse and a pro at cooking—all before junior high?! Amazing!!”

I get a pic of the two of us together before taking off my makeup when I get home and post a tweet. It passes 10,000 likes in all of five minutes.

“Holy?! Look at all those new followers!! Hooooooly?!!!”

Munching on the food Shorty made after taking a bath, I scroll through the comments on my phone with my free hand and can’t believe the response. The storm of retweets has grown so big that my post is getting picked up by sites completely unrelated to Shogi.

“Yuck The Internet is filled with nothing but lolicons. If only all these new

followers could be thrown in jail. I guess I'll just have to report them all. ☆”

“Please don’t do that! What if Master is in there?!”

Shorty, still wearing her apron and rubber gloves from washing dishes, shows up behind me at the speed of light and grabs both my thumbs before I can start clicking.

“Huh? I didn’t think Kuzuryu-*sensei* had social media accounts.”

“He doesn’t as far as I know But he does have a talent for finding small cute girls

“Versatile, isn’t he? And it seems that even you, his apprentice, don’t completely trust him

Well, plenty of players keep an eye on social media without having an account of their own. There’s a decent chance Kuzuryu-*sensei* will see my post if it keeps spreading like this.

But seriously, I never expected anything close to this level of response.

If revealing that we are roommates and a few dinner pics draws this much attention, a cooking video should absolutely fly off the charts. I’ve got tons of other ideas, too.

“A makeup tutorial might be good. Girls out there would love to see a baby face like yours get all dolled up and sparkly, don’t you think?”

“..... I can see why other women don’t like you very much, Rokuroba-*sensei*.”

“I already know they hate me, so that doesn’t hurt one bit. Actually, getting a bit of hate is about perfect. Fighting other women comes with the job.”

“.....!”

I ignore the elementary school girl’s wide eyes staring at me and count up the videos I want to make on my fingers.

“Okay, so cooking is a given. Then there’s the makeup. How about video gaming commentary? Oh, and——.”

“What about Shogi?!”

“Yeeeah. For the amount of effort that goes into making those vids, they

aren't worth it. Shogi is old news."

"You are a Women's Shogi player, aren't you, Rokuroba-sensei?"

"Doing a match with live commentary and posting it online gets a decent number of likes, but playing fast Shogi online after a long day at work? I haven't got the energy for that. You'll understand once you start working."

"Okay, what about competing with someone to see who can solve Shogi puzzles faster?"

"So dull!"

"..... Ngh."

Who in their right mind would want to watch two Women's Shogi players huddled over a Shogi puzzle, staring at it until one shouts: I solved it!? Talk about niche! Well, wait. Maybe the maniacs would dig that? Hmm. I don't know what makes lolicons tick.

"If, hypothetically, we made that video, what would we do for the puzzles themselves? There's a little thing called copyright, you know? Are we supposed to use free-use puzzles from hundreds of years ago? Lots of people know the answers to the famous ones already"

"Um If you're worried about puzzles, I have plenty"

The little girl pulls a tablet out of her bag and slowly holds it out to me.

"Ngh?! Wh-What is this"

Already open on the screen is——.

"*Two Kings*? No, that's from an actual match, isn't it? Still, it looks like the players tossed a handful of pieces on the board and went with it"

"I have about 50,000 of these. None of them are copyrighted."

"F-F-?!"

Why in the world does she have a file like that?!

"No! I'm tired after playing Shogi all day, so even looking at these puzzles makes me want to puke!"

"If you're tired, Rokuroba-sensei, I can play instead. My classmates talk a

lot about YouTubers at school, and I'd like to see what it's like"

What? Does she want me to make a video called Elementary School Girl Massacres Geezers in Shogi or something?

Considering that I get roasted for being narcissistic or making light of Shogi in the comments just for uploading videos, I should be happy she's willing to work with me.

Maybe it's the generation gap?

"Hmm It might be fun to see just how many viewers doing live commentary for your online matches can get. You know what? Let's do that right now. ☆"

"Just like that?!"

"I've been wanting some new content. And sitting around wondering is just a waste of time. Here, I bought us a matching set of jammies. Put them on."

I put on the jammies I bought on my way back from work (the really fluffy kind that makes you look like a big stuffed animal) and get my phone set up on a tripod. Next, it's time to set up my in-home studio.

"What's the point of putting these here?" asks the confused elementary school girl as she follows my orders and lines up a row of sparkling unicorns.

Point? Point, hmm

"People watching these vids look at everything in the frame and try to figure out what every little thing means. Think of it like Easter eggs or allegories in movies."

"Easter what?"

Either you get it or you don't.

Everything is set up and ready in five minutes. I've done it enough to do it with my eyes closed.

"Too much dead time and viewers will get bored, so you'll be on a three-minute timer. Run out and the match is over. We'll keep going until you lose, sound good?"

"What if I lose the first match?"

“I’d post the vid with the title: Who saw this coming?! Women’s Shogi player can’t win a single match online and cries her eyes out.”

—That ought to make her play seriously.

This won’t be any big deal, or so I thought.

“While we’re live, you will call me Tamayon-*sensei*, understand? Okay, here we go!”

“Y-Yes!”

We take a seat on my bed in our matching fluffy pajamas. The little girl nervously clutches her tablet to her chest. She fits the little sister trope to the letter.

I put on my Tamayon face and—.

“Heeello interwebs~☆ You’re tuned in to Tamayon Channel, with a spur of the moment livestream! This Women’s League player, who happens to be an elementary school student and also my roommate, is about to take on challenges over the Internet~☆”

“I-I’m Ai Hinatsuru! Thank you for watching!!”

From what I’ve heard, lolicons can’t get enough of that innocent nervous stutter.

Look at that! Over 10,000 viewers on an unannounced livestream within the first minute.

Even better, I’ve already got over ¥100,000 worth of tips. The ka-ching sound effect is going off nonstop. The money is printing itself.

“We’ll be live until *Ai-tan* loses! Well, everyone You know what that means, right?”

“This’ll be over quick!”

“Tamayon: the slave driver.”

“You’ve got it in for your junior.”

Word gets out on other social media platforms that an elementary school-aged Women’s League player is doing a livestream, and formidable opponents

start requesting to play her one after another.

“Oh! Look who we have here! It’s Hidaruma in the first match! Can Hinatsuru Women’s 1-*dan* handle such a tough opponent right out of the gate?! Ai-*tan*, good luck!”

“Haaauuuu

I do my best anime announcer impression to please the otakus, but Shorty is way too nervous to notice. Then again, she might be too young to get the reference.

Hidaruma is pretty famous in online Shogi circles, famous for attacking so fast and furious that there’s nothing you can do to stop them.

They’re used to playing with a countdown timer rather than waiting time, so they eat professionals and Women’s League players for breakfast. They’ll be even more raring to go because this is a live broadcast, so we’re in for a gritty blitzkrieg of a match.

But, Ai Hinatsuru burns Hidaruma to a crisp in a mere 50 seconds.

“Whew I was so nervous!”

The words nervous people don’t play like that! come pouring into the comments section thousands of times. Her Shogi was that perfect.

Seriously, the little girl opened the match by sliding her Rook into action like opening a fight with a flying sidekick. No time off the clock, no mercy.

Once she slid that Rook forward, her opponent never found a chance to go on the offensive. Their King was meticulously cornered in the end. Game over. She didn’t even let them surrender.

“Ohhhh WOW! Well, I can see why you’re the youngest to ever qualify for the Women’s Legend League, Ai-*tan*! You played like a ruthless little ogre just now! Is there anyone watching right now who wants to challenge the Women’s League player who’s in the zone?”

Now that she’s proved herself against one of the Internet’s big names, even more strong players are signing up in droves.

Some of the accounts are rumored to belong to professional players, and one

of the names belongs to a Women's Player I know, but—.

“Great going, Ai-tan!! Ten wins all in a row! You're good! No, you're great!!”

She hasn't let a single check path slip past her.

That's not all. Her defense has been even more perfect. She cuts off all sequences that could put her in check by moving the King out of the way two steps in advance. Without using a single second, even. The clock hasn't dropped below one minute remaining during any of her 10 matches.

How much can she read in a second

I'm feeling a chill, and it's only getting stronger. My skin is soaked in a cold sweat under these pajamas.

“WOOOW! You're so strong, Ai-tan!!”

Tips pour in every time she wins. Viewership is skyrocketing. This has gone way beyond the realm of a Shogi livestream, and it's starting to get scary. Is it just me, or is it really really hot in this room

But, the cold sweats won't stop.

Twenty consecutive wins.

“Is this for real

The viewers haven't been able to believe their eyes. I don't believe mine. The carnage

Then, around the time she passed 30 wins in a row—one of them shows up.

“Hm? This account seems

They're completely ignoring defense. It's an all-out attack, plain as day. The account name has no personality or flair whatsoever. And they're bizarrely efficient on the board. It really comes through the mid-and late-game that *they're playing like a man possessed*

No doubt about it. It's a software user.

The elementary school girl has probably figured it out as well.

“?! Here

Her intensity ramps up as the timer ticks down *for the first time*. An incredible

five-second eternity of thinking time.

There's pretty much only one way for professionals and Women's League players to deal with a software user when they run into one online.

Lose in the most respectable way possible.

Pointing out that they're using software only blows up in your face. The other guy is planning on uploading a vid that proves their innocence to get more views. You're going to lose anyway, so the best you can do is not let the world see anything embarrassing on your way out.

—Livestreams *This* is exactly why I don't want to do them.

I think of running into a software user during a livestream like getting caught up in a car accident. Just surrender with a smile and say: You're just too strong for me. Everyone has their own way, but that's what I'd do.

Exposing this misery to the world is livestreaming in a nutshell. With these miserable losses online for anyone to see, other Shogi players lose their trust in you and you lose Shogi fans at the same time.

It's not something you can do halfheartedly, and those who do quit just as quickly.

—So You need strong resolve. You need to gain *something valuable enough to justify sacrificing trust*.

I watch the events unfold and my slightly evil side wonders what kind of show I'll be treated to.

—So, Shorty. How are you going to deal with it?

She simply keeps rolling with the punches.

“Herehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere!”

At a higher gear, too.

—Sh-She hasn't been playing full go?!

Just looking at those wide eyes analyzing every single pixel of the display at high speed, it's plain as day that her reading speed and the amount she can calculate aren't normal. I can feel it in my skin. She's beyond human, isn't she?

She's going against a strong opponent. It's pretty easy to tell it's a software user from their speed in the sequences they use. Young players like me have used Shogi software for research so much that this kind of strength is practically carved into our very hearts.

And that ultimate software is getting beaten to a pulp by this little girl. Her merciless beatdown shows no signs of letting up.

Actually... wait.

—Is is she stronger against software than actual people?! Is that even possible?!

And now, her win count has reached—.

“Fif- fifty wins in a row?”

No matter how many times I check the counter at the corner of the screen, that's what it says.

50 – 0.

“This can't be real, right?”

“A Women's Leaguer winning 50 in a row? Rigged, obviously.”

“Her not using any time is real suspicious.”

“Soft-user, yeah?”

“The fact that Tamayon has stopped her commentary is even more suspicious.”

The viewers have their doubts. It's live, and they still can't believe it.

I don't blame them either.

I'm sitting right in front of her... and I don't believe it.

“..... This is insane What the heck is she?”

I don't believe it But I've watched it all happen, so I don't have any choice but to believe.

What Jin-Jin said last night.

—An elementary school girl with a better late-game than A division

professionals

And, that leapfrog thing.

A frog that tries, fails and overcomes to succeed at a breakneck pace.

—How long is one of our days to her?

There's no way we're living in the same 24 hours.

The thought of sleeping in the same room with this monster terrifies me. Knowing that I'll be fighting in the same world as this beast for the rest of my life is enough to make my blood run cold

—Could anyone stay in their right mind living with this monstrosity?

There was one.

The Demon King of the West.

A room that had two of these frogs living in it at the same time is about the closest thing to a real Hyperbolic Time Chamber as it gets.

Spending one day there would be a year for Jin-Jin and I, maybe even longer—.

“Rokuroba-sensei,” says the monster sitting on her ankles with her tablet in her hands.

A monster who forgot what she's supposed to call me.

“I missed the shortest path to checkmate in the last match. May I please play another?”

“.....”

I can't watch this anymore.

If I do I'm not sure I'll ever be able to play Shogi again

“Oh, would you look at that! It's past this little girl's bedtime! Sorry~!”

That was the best excuse I could come up with to stop the livestream. It set the record for the most views ever on Tamayon Channel: 1 million.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN A DIVISION PLAYER

Jun Natagiri 8-*dan*'s day begins with an early morning run.

"How far are we going to go?"

"Five kilometers should do."

"Huh?!"

F-Five?! Does he run that much every day?!

I have to run lots and lots at school, but the most I have to do at once is just three kilometers And that gives me a bad ache in my side

Rokuroba-*sensei* has a tracksuit on and starts stretching.

"Jin-Jin is fast too. But we'll take it slow."

"I-I'm sorry, Rokuroba-*sensei* You had to get up so early because I said I wanted to come along——."

"Not really. I join Jin-Jin on these runs when I want, and today happens to be one of those days."

We all start at the same time, but Natagiri-*sensei* widens the gap right away. Next thing I know, I can't even see him anymore!

A big difference between Osaka and Tokyo is all the hills.

So running is hard——.

"Haaahaaa haaahaaa"

"Your chin is too high! C'mon! Run with bad posture and you'll hurt yourself. It's alright to go slow, but make sure you have good posture."

"R-Rokuroba-*sensei* slow down a little please haaahaaa"

"For a speed demon at Shogi puzzles, you sure are slow on your feet. Shogi takes a surprising amount of endurance, so you better build it up now."

"Wh- what does r-running fast have to do with Shogi?"

“Plenty. Especially for women.”

“.....?”

What is the connection?

I want to ask for more details, but I’m too tired right now!

In the end, it takes me an hour to run only 3 km. My legs are jittery and my chest feels like it’s about to blow up

It’s really impressive how Natagiri-*sensei* can run five and barely break a sweat!

“Practice makes perfect, that’s all. The association used to sponsor a marathon back in the day, when I was a new 4-*dan*, if you can believe it.”

“A marathon? For Shogi players?!”

“He-he! That wouldn’t fly today, would it? The prize was any Shogi book on sale in the gift shop. Oh, how nice it was to get the whole set of an expensive series that was out of my price range!”

We stretch our muscles to cool down after our morning run. Meanwhile, Natagiri-*sensei* tells me all sorts of things I’ve never heard before...

...Such as the results of those marathons——.

“I won three years in a row, but then they canceled it. Natagiri’ll win anyway, so we’re done here! Well, the only reason I won was because everyone else went out for drinks late into the night before and they all wound up puking on the side of the road. It wouldn’t surprise me if Sendagaya city council had had enough and issued a formal request for them to stop.”

Ewww

“It felt amazing, knowing I was the best at something out of all the professionals. It did wonders for my confidence, too. I guess that’s why I’ve kept running every day all these years. I never placed first in anything else.”

“Confidence?”

“Yes

After a morning shower, Natagiri-*sensei* makes a beautiful breakfast for all of us. I volunteered to cook, but he wouldn't listen.

"I invite a lot of promising young boys to my practice sessions, but nary a one of them knows the importance of eating right."

Natagiri-*sensei* looks great in an apron! He reminds me of a news anchor on a morning news show demonstrating a recipe on TV! He wears it perfectly!

"So I like to know that they get at least one square nutritional meal while they're here. That way, they can concentrate on Shogi without all the fuss. Thinking in the long term!"

"That's so nice of you!"

Fancy salads in a glass. Five grain rice. Fruit and yogurt. Everything is delicious!

I'm in awe of Natagiri-*sensei*, but Rokuroba-*sensei* interjects.

"The food is nothing but bait. It's obvious what he's after."

"I don't think that someone hooked by that bait has any right to talk"

"Is that so? Do you want me to stuff you in one of those bottles and mail you back to Osaka?"

"He-he! It's only been one night but you two are already the best of buddies, ☆" Natagiri-*sensei* comments with a happy smile.

We are not buddies.

We finally start doing Shogi practice at 9 o'clock.

"I'm ready when you are!"

"Yes! Please begin."

The match begins with my move. Rokuroba-*sensei* said she happens to have nothing better to do today and offers to record the match for us. Everything feels just like a league match.

I'm going to be honest, okay?

Before the match, I felt a little confident.

Natagiri-*sensei* has been working with me online since last summer, ever since

I qualified for the Women's Legend League. I was helpless against him at first, but recently I've started being able to hold my own.

—I can win against A division players!

That confidence was a big part of my decision to come to Tokyo by myself.

This way, I could continue with the lessons I was receiving in Osaka, but be in the same room instead. That would help me learn more efficiently, or so I thought

Once the match began, I learned just how naïve I had been.

"I I lost"

"Yes. That match was an utter mess from the early-game. There's nothing to review, so let's move on to the next."

I try many different strategies and still lose.

Static Rook and Ranging Rook. He even picked my version of the Oishi-sensei's Gokigen Central Rook apart like it was nothing.

In the match when Natagiri-sensei used Goki-Central on the other hand, I mirrored his sequence, but at some point he changed it up and my formation fell apart

It was a double slap to the face. I couldn't do anything.

"..... I don't have any moves"

"Nope. On to the next."

Natagiri-sensei puts all the pieces back at starting position, always eager for the next match. That eagerness puts even more pressure on me.

This is completely different from playing online.

Online, it's easy to feel confident about your decisions because you can't see your opponent's face or hear their breathing. Once you have the I'm in the lead! feeling, it's easy to keep building on it.

But that's not the case in person.

Seeing an A division player confidently snap down a piece My first thought is: Did I make a mistake?! and my confidence disappears

“..... I lost”

I lost every match. Worse Each was a thorough and complete loss.

Rokuroba-*sensei*, who has been watching us since the start, speaks for the first time.

“You won 50 matches in a row online last night. I’m surprised those insane late-game skills didn’t win you a match or two.”

That makes two of us To be honest, I thought I would win more than that

I can’t say that out loud, of course, and Rokuroba-*sensei* piles on even more.

“You played against Kuzuryu-*sensei* before, right? Did you ever win?”

“Never in an even match, no I won several handicap matches. But——.”

“But? But what?”

“..... I think you might be stronger than Master.”

Master’s formations always had a weakness somewhere. I’m confident that I had a chance to win if a match came down to direct reading ability.

If I have one advantage over my opponent, I’m confident that I can win at least one match out of 100.

But——.

“Your Shogi has no weaknesses, Natagiri-*sensei*! If my early-game had any flaws, you immediately took advantage of them But, even if I made it into the mid-game, you used the whole board and easily shut me down!”

When I chose to attack, I lost.

So I avoided big clashes and used aerial battle strategies to force the late-game.

I attacked with the Double Wing, my best strategy.

It was using the Double Wing Attack when my confidence was completely crushed

“Rushing the late-game didn’t work because you used all sorts of competitive tactics along the way and turned the tables on me! Whatever move I wanted to

make, you somehow managed to block it before I could Even after I read all the way to the end!”

My heart felt like a puppet, and he held the strings.

Building up physical endurance is hard, but easy to understand. Your running time and distance shows you exactly how much you’ve improved with numbers.

But What can you do to train your heart?

What makes your heart stronger?

“The only way to get those competitive tactics is to take them from other players, face-to-face.”

Natagiri-*sensei* explains how he had the same problem when he was a young player because he didn’t have anyone to play against living in the countryside.

How he struggled against veteran players, even though their match records were not impressive at all.

“If I have any advice to give, it would be to play against as many people as possible instead of just one person in particular. That way you can pick up on a lot of tells and tricks. I could arrange some matches for you, but it would be better to find opponents on your own in the long run. That itself is a vital skill.”

“..... Yes, sir!”

My response was a second late because I’m not confident that I can find someone who will do a practice session with me in Tokyo right now.

Maria Kannabe, a Sub League member, probably would if I asked her. That would give me an opportunity to ask her older brother, God-*sensei*, as well.

But I can’t do that right now.

Because I still haven’t given up on challenging their Master, Women’s Legend Rina Shakando, for her title this season.

“Shorty. You said that you played against Kuzuryu-*sensei* in even matches——.”

Rokuroba-*sensei* holds up the match record that she took and points to it with a confused look on her face.

“Does that mean that Kuzuryu-*sensei* plays the early-game like you do, too?”

“Master wasn’t very strict when it came to the early-game. I guess he was open-minded

“Yeah, Kuzuryu-*sensei* seems to always do something weird that puts him behind. He’d probably win a lot more if he just played normally.”

Th-That was probably all part of the grand scheme in Master’s mind But she’s right.

“Then again, Yaichi is the one with the titles and he’s the one who wins in the end.”

“.....!”

“Dragon King Ryuo Yaichi Kuzuryu had something at 16 years old that the current Jin Natagiri 8-*dan* does not. I think taking a title from the Meijin will be rather difficult without finding out what it is first,” said the A division challenger as he returned the pieces to their starting position.

“I have to find the last key Yes?”

It’s late at night by the time we finish our practice session.

I’m exhausted, but Natagiri-*sensei* still seems to have plenty of energy. Actually, he’s sitting up straighter now than when we were practicing.

“I’ll be doing early-game research to prepare for the Monarch Title Match starting now. With software, of course. Then some Shogi puzzles and that should do it for today.”

“P-Preparing for your title match now?! At night?”

I ask him why he put off doing the most important thing.

Natagiri-*sensei* answers——.

“Shogi all comes down to the late-game, yes? In other words, you have to make the most important decisions when you are already at your limit. I’m training myself for that very moment. My reading has to be accurate, even when I’m tired and under pressure.”

“.....”

It shocks me that anyone can live with so much crammed into one day. I'm speechless.

Just one day.

I'm worn out after just one of them My muscles were sore the next day, and I couldn't sit on my ankles at all.

Every day I spent with Master was so much fun. Everything was exciting and I couldn't wait to wake up in the morning I never felt tired, not even once.

But those days are over.

From now on I will be working hard to improve myself every single day.

What I need to do now is learn Shogi techniques and strategies and nothing more. In order to pick up as many techniques as I can and to learn how to survive as a Shogi player in the city called Tokyo, I will be intruding on Natagiri-*sensei* and Rokuroba-*sensei* for the time being. So long as they don't kick me out.

Master.

I'm fighting as hard as I can in Tokyo.

I'm sure you're fighting against a new wall like always, aren't you?

KUZURYU'S NOTEBOOK

My second meeting with Machi takes place in a café on the shore of the Kamogawa River.

“How about something simple for the title, such as Kuzuryu’s Notebook?”

The Kamogawa River is famous for all the couples who sit along its banks even in the middle of winter. This café, which has a clear view of them, also happens to be where Machi brought me to do a piece for a magazine article she was writing at the time.

Apparently, the picture of us spoon-feeding each other this café’s signature green tea parfait like an overly lovey-dovey couple was a huge hit. It flew off the shelves all around Kansai. Even the wrath of Big Sis and Ai, who bought the magazine for some reason, can’t tarnish the good memories I have here.

However, this meeting is so up-tempo that I don’t have time to bask in memories that hurt so good.

“Isn’t that too simple?”

I let Machi know I’m not happy with the title.

“I understand that coming up with the title isn’t easy because the book I’m planning to write isn’t based on strategy alone. But, you know? I don’t think anyone would bother picking it up without something a bit more specific on the cover.”

After all, I’ll be committing my heart and soul to my debut, this maiden release. I won’t let it be published with a simple title like that!

It seems like Machi was expecting that complaint.

“Indeed... which is why we will add a subtitle to it. As in Shogi, the publication world has its own standards that we follow.”

“A subtitle? Like what?”

“I have a few suggestions ready——.”

Machi opens her notepad and begins reading down the list with vigor.

“My editor-in-chief suggests Kuzuryu Notebook: That Time I Took a Grade School Girl as a Live-In Apprentice and Won a Surprising Number of Matches After Dropping 11 in a Row While Becoming Super Popular with Grade School Girls.”

“I’m writing a book about Shogi, right?”

“A book about Shogi, yes. Why bother asking such an obvious question?” asks Machi, surprised.

I’m the one who’s surprised!

“Because the word Shogi isn’t in the subtitle but Grade School Girl shows up twice!! Is that what your editor is after?! Just what do they think I am at the office, huh?! Depending on your answer, I’ll be writing to a lawyer instead of writing a book!!”

“Your reputation is typical. That of a typical loli- professional Shogi player.”

“You were about to say lolicon just now, weren’t you?”

By the way, when I say office, I’m talking about the editorial department of the Japanese Shogi Association, and its editor’s office is in the basement of the Kanto Shogi Association Building in Sendagaya. In other words, these title suggestions are a direct reflection of what they think of me

“..... For now, may I hear your other ideas?”

“My editor-in-chief’s second suggestion is Kuzuryu’s Notebook: What If a Grade School Aged Live-In Apprentice Read the Trash Dragon King’s Research. Call it If-Dora for short. Any thoughts?”

“How is that any different from the one before? I can’t even tell if it’s a book or not anymore.”

Her boss literally found a way to call the author trash, too.

“I really think the best option would be to forget the subtitle and come up with a better main title——.”

“Loli Notebook, perhaps?”

That’s the part you keep?!

“All right, fine! We can keep it as Kuzuryu’s Notebook! Simple is best! That’s the best one, isn’t it?!!”

“Indeed. I have been saying so since the start.”

“The start? Ah!”

I finally connect the dots when I see the isn’t it obvious? look in Machi’s eyes.

“I get it. This is one of *those standards*, isn’t it?”

“Te-he-he.” My skillful editor grins like a fox and says, “That one is entitled: use absurd suggestions in order to have your original idea approved.”

“Yeah, yeah You got me hook, line and sinker! That’s how you can keep calling me a lolicon when you don’t think it’s true at all!”

“You are free to think so.”

“Hah! Hah! Hah! You got me good!”

Now that the pressure of choosing a title is off, I finally reach for my spoon to take a bite out of my untouched parfait, but——.

“Here.”

Machi scoops out a spoonful and puts it in front of my lips before I can.

“Huh? Um, this is a bit much”

“Editorial support.”

Oh? Editors do this for authors, too? Man, what a great job I think to myself as I take a bite. Sweet

“We promised to return here without work on our last visit, but it turns out we came back for work reasons once again.”

“..... Well, that sounds like us, don’t you think?”

Machi and I first met over 10 years ago at the Elementary Meijin Tournament.

Apparently I went to comfort her when she was crying after I beat her in the semifinals. I was so nervous before the finals that I don’t remember doing that, though.

“I’ll show you some cool Shogi, so please don’t cry,” is what I said

apparently. That sounds like a pickup line if you ask me.

Even though we are two years apart in age, we became friends after that and traveled back and forth between Osaka and Kyoto to play Shogi. Ryo Tsukiyomizaka joined us sometimes.

But that relationship changed almost right away.

Machi joined the Women's League. I was still in the Sub League, so I had no choice but to call her Sensei in public. And then——.

“Starting today, I will be working as a journalist under the pen name Mato.”

I still remember the shock of seeing her, then a junior high school student, dressed up in a business suit and talking like a professional.

“Please allow me to cover your career, Mr. Kuzuryu.”

The aura pulsing from her eyes was overwhelming All I could do was nod.

“Back then, I was amazed at how many jobs you were doing, but Didn't someone try to stop you? Playing for a title while also writing articles at the same time couldn't have been easy.”

“My Master is quite open-minded when it comes to these things. In fact, he was my strongest supporter.”

“Ahh So, how is the Sage?”

“Far more of a handful after retirement, to be honest. He has always been more interested in writing articles than playing Shogi itself.”

“Ayano has been talking about becoming a journalist for a long time, too.”

Machi's Master, Kayaoku 7-dan, has written hundreds and hundreds of articles and is actually more well-known as a writer than a player. That's why the Shogi world has dubbed him the Sage. Anything else, and he would write so many bad things about people once he got an idea in his head that it's not even funny Though he seems to have the wrong idea about me.

“But whoever you end up with is going to be one lucky guy, Machi.”

“Huh?!”

“I mean, he's going to get taken out to the best restaurants every single time.

First it was boiled tofu and now we're here at this café. These meetings are so much fun they might as well be dates, yeah?"

"He-he Then perhaps third time is the charm for returning here without work? Next time for sure."

Machi jokes as she runs the head of her long spoon across her lips.

BEFORE GETTING TO THE BOARD

“Wait right there. I’ll come with you.”

Just as I’m about to leave for my league match in Sendagaya, Rokuroba-sensei hurriedly puts on a coat and follows me out the door.

“Huh? But Sensei, you don’t have a match today, do you?”

“I’m on winter break, so I’ve got extra time on my hands without classes to go to. So I thought I’d take care of some of the autographs the association asked me to sign and do an interview. Popular Women’s League players are always busy because there’s so much work to do.”

So we leave the apartment together.

I’m playing my sixth Women’s Legend League match today.

I’ll be playing against Kazumi Houroku Women’s 3-*dan* for the first time. She’s known for her aggressive style, even being nicknamed after her home prefecture: Gunma’s Dynamite. I’ve also heard that she’s beaten an A division professional before. She has the first move, so I’ll be on the receiving end, I think. Is my defense strong enough? If I remember right, Keika made a mistake defending against her in the Mynavi Women’s Open Challenge Match. Let’s see, I think she played like

“Stop.”

A hand on my shoulder stops me in my tracks while I’m thinking about my opponent.

“Do not go into the shrine.”

“Uwhaa?”

It’s Hatomori Shrine, just across the street from Sendagaya Station. I’ve come here with Master and the Grade Schooler Practice Group before.

“But since it’s on the way, I thought I’d stop by and pray——.”

I always stop here before going to a match in Tokyo, so I thought I would go inside today too, but I can’t go? Why not?

“Do not enter the shrine, coming or going. The same goes for parks, too. Stay where it’s well lit and there are lots of people. The rule of thumb is: don’t go anywhere alone.”

“But

Almost all the league matches are on weekdays, so it would be impossible to have someone with me all the time, wouldn’t it?

And people always look down on me just because I’m in elementary school. I’m not a baby that needs a chaperone all the time!

“If I may say something! I came to Tokyo by myself to get stronger——.”

“Gooooood morning, everyone! Tamayon is here~☆”

Rokuroba-sensei ignores me like a soft breeze and walks straight into the association. Her first stop is the front office.

This floor is much, much bigger than the first floor of the Kansai Association.

I’m always too nervous to say anything here because I don’t know anyone. The last thing I want to do is disturb them, so I only speak when I have to fill out a form.

Rokuroba-sensei goes around the office and greets everyone with a big smile.

I watch her from the spot next to office door until——.

“Oh, yes, that’s right! That girl there, she’s my new roomie!”

Yank!

She pulls me all the way up to the counter where the staff members are working.

“Go on. Introduce yourself.”

Uwhee?! S-So suddenly?!

“I-I’m Ai Hinatsuru! Um It’s nice to meet you

“Well, my roomie has a match to get to. I need to swing by the Women’s Player’s Room for a minute and I’ll be back to sign some autographs.”

We were there for about five minutes.

Once we step outside the office, Rokuroba-sensei issues another order.

“Greetings are extremely important. Don’t just stand around like you just did. Always, always, always take initiative and say hello. Make sure you say hello every time you come to the association. Understand?”

“B-But I-I don’t know who works at the office and who doesn’t”

“All the more reason to say hello to everyone. Simple, don’t you think?”

“.....”

Lots of visitors come to the association building’s classroom to play Shogi. Should I say hello to them, too?

Our next stop is a small room at the end of a long, dim hallway on the fifth floor.

Rokuroba-sensei opens a door with a sign that says Women’s League Player’s Room on it and goes inside.

“What are you waiting for? Get in here.”

“..... But”

“Why is it you had no problem barging into my home, but you’re too scared to go inside a room that is literally set aside for you? You’re part of the Women’s League, so you qualify to be here. Get inside.”

I get pulled forward again and look around the room. It’s not what I expected.

“It’s c-cramped And there are a lot of things in here.”

“It’s okay to call it messy, you know?”

I wouldn’t dare

“Is this really your first time in here? What have you done before your matches until now?”

“Um found someplace nearby and waited until it was time”

“Someplace? Are you telling me that a little girl like you has been loitering around in convenience stores and cafés in the middle of the day?! You’d get picked up by the police for sure!”

“A-Actually that already happened”

“You got taken away

“I called the association and had someone on staff explain it to them Then the policeman dropped me off at the association, in his car

“A patrol car

“Yes his patrol car

Master might end up riding in one of them someday, but I never thought I would ride one first.

“Unbelievable What if he took you to the station first, hmm? You would’ve missed your match, that’s what. Women’s League players don’t have much waiting time to begin with, so you might have to forfeit even if you’re just a little late. Besides, it’s not like you can focus on Shogi after something like that anyway.”

“

I lost my match that day, so I can’t say anything back to her.

In fact, I visit the shrine because I don’t really have a place to be inside the association building and I might get taken away by police officers if I’m walking around outside

I think that Rokuroba-sensei has already figured all of that out.

“I’ll be going home with you, too. I don’t care how early your match ends. Wait for me in the Women’s Player’s Room.”

I manage to keep Houroku-sensei’s aggressive style under control and win the match. Out of all six of my matches in the Women’s Legend League so far, I think it was my best one.

Defensive Shogi is hard because you have to keep your mind steady the whole time.

That’s many, many times harder than attacking for me. So I think being so calm before the match was a big reason I did so well this time.

—Is that why Rokuroba-sensei came with me today

That's the only reason that makes any sense.

—I have to thank her! I'll say thank you as soon as I see her!

I'm now at three wins and three losses.

I'm still on the brink of dropping out from contention, but Winning enough victory stars to break even in the Women's Legend League has restored my confidence! Well just a little.

We finish the review session, and then I talk to reporters because my match was broadcasted today.

But Houroku-*sensei* didn't use much of her waiting time at all, so I get to the Women's Player's Room pretty early despite all of that. I sit down and wait for Rokuroba-*sensei*, but——."

"You're Ai Hinatsuru Women's 1-*dan*, aren't you?"

A different Women's League *sensei* comes into the room first.

"Mind if I sit down? There's something I want to ask you about."

Rokuroba-*sensei* comes back to the Women's Player's Room 30 minutes after that.

"Oh? You finished up before me, huh?"

"I've been waiting for you!"

I jump to my feet and bow right in front of her.

"Um I won today thanks to your help! I really appr——."

"I'm aware. On a side note, did you talk with anyone else while you were waiting? I passed by several other Women's League players at the elevator."

"Wha?! Y-Yes O-One of the *senseis* came up to me"

"What did you talk about?"

"Um Nothing, really"

I swallow my words.

What we talked about would be difficult to say to Rokuroba-*sensei*.

“Ohhh? Well, I don’t really care either way!” she says and walks right out the door.

I jump up and scurry after her.

Women’s League matches typically have one or two hours of waiting time.

That’s why they usually end in the late afternoon, before the sun goes down, even if both players use all their waiting time.

But we were there a bit longer than usual today, so it’s already dark when we leave the association building.

—I didn’t know it got this dark around here at night

The Kansai Association building is on a main street and surrounded by shops and restaurants. Everything is lit up, even at night.

Here in Sendagaya, on the other hand, there are many narrow streets crisscrossing around the building and the shrine. The station is close, but ... going through here alone would be a little scary.

Walking down one of those streets—.

“.....?”

What was that?

Is someone following us around

“You noticed? Keep your eyes straight forward and stay next to me. We’re power walking to the main street Then we’ll find a café or something to lay low.”

“.....?!”

Rokuroba-sensei whispers to me without breaking stride, but I’m starting to panic.

The only thing on my mind right now is staying right at her side.

I breathe a sigh of relief as soon as we step inside a small restaurant. We go stand by the window and watch the person who was following us.

It’s a man I’ve never seen before

There’s a smartphone in his hand.

He stays outside the restaurant, not doing much of anything for a while, but He finally gives up and disappears.

My knees are trembling, and I couldn't speak if I wanted to. Rokuroba-*sensei* looks at me and says, "Your match was broadcast in real time today. The start time and ending time were put out there for the whole world to see. Do you understand what that means?"

".....?"

"That you can be ambushed."

"?! Amb——?"

Why would?

"He could've been a well-meaning fan. I think most of them are. And I know that their support is what allows us to keep playing Shogi. However, I don't think I have to tell you what might happen if he wasn't one of those well-meaning fans."

Rokuroba-*sensei* calls a taxi just to be safe, and we leave the restaurant.

She then tells me about a lot of things while we're in the car.

All sorts of stories about times when men came up to Women's League players out of the blue.

There were even some who were chased down by someone on a bicycle or in a car

"Even if they are a well-meaning fan, as a woman, it's scary to have a man you've never met try to strike up a conversation somewhere that has nothing to do with Shogi. They know all sorts of things about you, but you have no idea who they are."

"B-But That man just now didn't say anything Maybe we overreacted——."

"The ones that speak up might be better."

".....?"

"What if you never notice them following you because they never announced themselves? If I hadn't been with you today, you'd have led that man right to

where Jin-Jin and I live, you know?”

“Ah!”

“That’s what it means to live in Tokyo. The only one you can count on to protect you is yourself. That’s why I came with you today. *To protect myself.*”

A really eye-opening day is almost over.

My mind is all over the place. But there’s only one thing I know for sure.

—I have to thank Rokuroba-sensei

She was just being shy, saying that she was only protecting herself She came to protect me

We get out of the taxi and go up to the apartment. Just before going in, I bow my head low and say the most heartfelt thank you I can.

“Um! Rokuroba-sensei, I can’t thank you enough for——.”

“You really aren’t cut out for the Women’s League.”

“.....?! ”

Those words feel like a slap. It’s all I can do to stay standing.

“After today, I can tell. You’ve got a bit of a lucky streak going but that’ll fizzle out eventually. You should go back to Osaka... now. I’m 100 percent serious.”

“..... Why do you say that?”

“You’re already losing by the time you get to the board.”

“Before getting to the board?”

“That younger sister apprentice of yours, she’s a powerhouse in that regard.”

“Ten-chan?”

“Not only does she have a bodyguard with her, but she uses her assets to make sure she goes in at her best. She knows that there are more battles being fought than one using pieces. I hate that about her, and I’m jealous. But, just because I’m angry about it doesn’t mean I think it’s unfair.”

Rokuroba-sensei doesn’t look angry at all to me.

“However, you don’t seem to get what the word equal actually means.”

She just keeps spelling out truths one after another.

All the true reasons why I don't deserve to be in the Women's League.

I would rather if she were angry at me This hurts so much more

"Are rich and poor equal? No. How about men and women? No again. Everyone is equal at the board sounds pretty, but that's about it."

"B-But! Shogi isn't like sports! There's no difference between boys and girls!! Sora-sensei becoming a professional player proves——."

"Have you had girl problems yet?"

"Girl?"

"I'll take that as a no. In that case, I'll give you a heads up."

That turn is so unexpected that it leaves me speechless.

"I can't speak for everyone else, but Shogi is the last thing I want to do during my time of the month. My stomach hurts to all hell, the tiniest little things tick me off and I can't focus at all. But I still have to play league matches. It's a normal thing for women and we're not sick is what some big wig at the association thinks."

Sensei starts talking faster and faster.

In terms of biology I know there's a difference between the genders. But I've never thought of it having any connection to Shogi until just now.

I had always assumed that a path would open up for me if I got strong. All I needed to do was put myself in the right environment: the stricter, the better.

But I never had any guarantees or support to go with that assumption It was all my own thinking

And Rokuroba-sensei saw right through that——.

"You might think you can become just like Yaichi Kuzuryu. Well: news flash! You won't... ever."

She crushed the one hope I held dearest to my heart.

Easily. With just a few words.

"People who refuse to acknowledge their own weaknesses will never fix them.

You are beneath Ai Yashajin. As long as she's around, you'll never claim a title. You'll only amount to a second-rate Women's League player who goes titleless for the rest of her life. You get popular, maybe, but you'll never have a title."

Each of her words feels like a sharp dagger raining down on me.

They all slice into my heart, and I feel the blood gushing out.

The pain. It hurts so much.

The strange thing is that I don't feel angry at Sensei at all.

That must be because—.

Rokuroba-sensei looks to be in a lot more pain saying these things than I am hearing them

"The problem comes before being strong or weak or whether you have talent or not. It's that you're not doing things as a Women's League player that you should be doing. *You can but don't.* That's just bad class right there."

I'm not doing things that I should

"That's what pisses everyone off about you. Get it?"

Rokuroba-sensei opens the door and goes inside without me

All I can do is stand here, staring at the door in front of me.

I'm too overwhelmed to take a step.

"....."

Because I realized I'm shallow enough to be seen right through in a single day.

I was clueless.

I had no idea how sheltered I was while living with Master.

I had no idea how much everyone did to protect me when I lived in Osaka.

How naïve I was to leave Master's side, and how that rashness is causing so much trouble for Natagiri-sensei and Rokuroba-sensei.

—I can't step forward anymore

My heart is this close to shattering.

I won my match, but my fighting spirit is cracked For a moment, throwing

all this away and leaving Tokyo right now sounded like a good idea.

“..... Even so, I want!”

It hurts. It's painful, but....

Even so—I was already taught what I need to do.

And, one more thing.

The meaning behind what I can do but am not doing.

“..... You're saying that *I can do it*, aren't you?”

I wipe away a tear with the back of my hand just before it falls.

Then I force myself to smile, open the door and *greet* her as loud as I can.

“Ai Hinatsuru! I have returned from the association!!”

Rokuroba-sensei looks a little surprised at first, but then, like nothing happened at all, says, “Welcome back.”

After that, she blushes awkwardly and demands, “Now make dinner. I'm starving.”

▲ BUT THAT'S SHOGI

“..... ost.”

It takes me a second to realize those words didn't come out right. After all, I'm coming to grips with the fact that I've lost consecutive league matches for the first time in two months.

Ten wins in a row followed by two losses in a row.

“Well All streaks come to an end at some point. ☆ Winning and losing.”

Now that I'm on my own after the review session, I take a moment to cheer myself up. Everything's fine Everything's fine A certain special someone told me that if you tell yourself everything's fine enough times, it will be. ☆

“Yeah, right.”

To be brutally honest, the opponents I lost to were beneath me. I had them penciled in as victory stars when I first saw the schedule, so losing is quite a shock. I haven't checked the league standings yet, but there's a chance I've lost the top spot.

My heart pounds in my chest as I go up to have a look. I haven't been this nervous since checking my university entrance test results. No, this is worse It feels like an out-of-body experience.

It wasn't that long ago that the golden tape across the finish line was in sight.

For the first time in my Women's Shogi career, I feel like I could jump out and take it——.

Nauseated with dread, I look up at the standings.

“Ahh Safe, by the skin of my teeth”

All matches for the seventh round of the Women's Legend League finished today. My 4 – 3 record is still at the top, it's just now I'm tied with two others.

I glance at the results for the other match that took place today.

○ Ai Hinatsuru Women's 1-*dan* (4 wins – 3 losses) ● Azami Hanadachi Women's 4-*dan* (3 wins – 4 losses)

The elementary school girl faced down a former title holder like she was supposed to win and did. That's four match victories in a row for her.

And now, she's pulled even with me in victory stars.

"Oh, Tamayooon! Over here, over here!"

"It's good to see you, Rokuroba-sensei!"

The moment I step into a small yet fancy Italian restaurant—in Sendagaya—two voices call my name from a table at the exact same time.

I turn to face the well-proportioned woman sitting next to the wall, freeze in place and bow my head.

"I-It has been too long! It's an honor to receive your invitation!!"

The little girl looks at me with big, confused eyes.

"..... Sensei? Are you feeling okay?"

"If you knew Big Sister Azami when she became the first Queen, you wouldn't be so lackadaisical right now!"

The Thorn Princess from Ibaraki Prefecture was just that terrifying.

She made me bawl my eyes out during my first review session with her, so you can take that to the bank.

"You think Shogi's a joke?"

Actually, that wasn't a review session. It was a full-blown lecture. It went on longer than the match itself and lasted late into the night. We ended up walking all the way to Home-ken Ramen shop and I still remember sitting next to her at the counter saying, "I'bu sooo swooorry! I don't thwink Shobi is a jwoke!!" between rounds of snot and tears. I must've apologized 100 times.

Big Sister Azami never said a word to the junior high-aged me, but she paid for my dumplings.

The Azami Hanadachi of those days makes Ryou Tsukiyomizaka look like an angry puppy. That's why the so-called Aggressive Archangel doesn't intimidate me at all when we play.

I learned what being a professional meant from Big Sister Azami.

That's why around the time she transferred to Kansai and Naniwa's Snow White cast a dark cloud over Women's League players in Kanto, I created the over-the-top Tamayon persona and stuck with it.

I don't have the skills and talent that Big Sister Azami does. I can't match her beauty or grace, either. That meant I had to forge my own path in the world of Women's Shogi.

..... Well, not that anything I say or do is all that convincing without a title, so almost nobody gets that. ☆

"I must say I'm surprised that you know Shorty well enough to invite her out for dinner after your match. Even though you both were registered in Kansai, I thought you would have been on maternity leave most of the time she was there"

"Ai came to visit me in Osaka with Yaichi and Ai Yashajin too! I was a little worried when I heard she transferred to Kanto But I suppose I've got nothing to worry about if she's with you, Tamayo."

"You give me too much credit"

Apparently, the elementary school girl has already told her a few things. Probably claimed that I've been bullying her, no doubt!

"If I may ask: why did you come to play the match in Tokyo today? You outrank Shorty so much that she should have been the one to travel to Osaka, right?"

"Oh, my husband had a placement match yesterday here in Kanto. Everything worked out better if I played my match in Tokyo, so I had the scheduler take care of it. My hubby is looking after the girls at Shinjuku Gyoen Park right now. I'll meet up with them after this and go visit my parents in Ibaraki."

"Their whole family is going to visit Yume no Kuni Theme Park! I bet Sa-chan can't wait!"

"Sa-chan?"

"She's Hanadachi-sensei's oldest daughter! She just turned three and is sooo cute!"

“Oh? That cute, huh?”

“Yes! Master fell for her so much that he was still saying she was adorable the day after we got home. He said so about 16 times He seems to like girls more the younger they are I’m sure he’s completely forgotten about me by now and found some younger girl to fawn over Of course, he has that *darabuchi*!”

“Uh-huh.”

I’m not touching that.

“So, Big Sister Azami. How did your husband do in his placement match?”

“Oh, horribly. His opponent was Kannabe 7-*dan*, the one who’s all but guaranteed to promote this season. My hubby didn’t stand a chance. That boy really could be the next Meijin.”

Jin-Jin was really zoned in on that rising star for a while.

They did have one practice session, but Jin-Jin got rejected. The reason was because they’ll end up playing against each other in A division. Imagine that! A 19-year-old B-2 upstart rejecting practice sessions with an A division player and giving that as his excuse? Even Jin-Jin had to bite his tongue

Well, it turns out he wasn’t all talk after all.

“I think that’s why Shakando-*sensei* has latched on to her title for all these years and never let go.”

“Huh?” I ask, not picking up the hint.

Just for a second, I thought I saw the old Thorn Princess come through as she clarifies. “Because she wants to be the Women’s Legend when her apprentice becomes Meijin.”

I do a lot of thinking on the train ride home.

My next match is over there, so why don’t we have dinner after it’s over? It’s been ages! Ai can join us, too.

Something felt very wrong when I saw that message.

The Thorn Princess I know wouldn't have been in such a good mood after losing.

She definitely wouldn't have shared a meal with the one who defeated her, either

Never in my wildest dreams did I think that Thorn Princess would ever become kindhearted mother Seeing her like that felt like a betrayal, in a way.

And, at the same time It sparked a different emotion inside me.

"..... Hey, Shorty. During your match today, what was Big Sister Azami like——?" I start asking the elementary school girl sitting next to me, but find myself at a loss for words when I see what's on the tablet she's holding.

"Wha Why are you playing Shogi going home after a match?"

"This is how I relax."

"Huh? But that's Shogi."

"Doing Shogi puzzles when you're tired gets better results."

"Oh, I see! ☆ Very true! It's just like practicing the late-game when you're too tired to think! As if!!"

I run with it a bit before snapping at her in the middle of the train. I'm just playing along, that's all!!

"Aren't you supposed to do, I don't know, something where you don't have to think to relax?"

"So Play Ranging Rook?"

"Are you trying to piss off half of humanity all at once?!"

Seventy-five percent of all Women's League players, including me, play Ranging Rook!! Have a death wish, does she?!

"Then, maybe play through some match records——."

"Like I said! THAT'S SHOGI!!"

She doesn't seem to have a clue why I'm yelling. Those big, round eyes of hers are staring up at me.

I knew it. She's not cut out for the Women's League.

There's a big difference between being good at Shogi and playing Shogi for a living.

That's one of the lessons Big Sister Azami taught me as a junior high student.

Shogi is work, and being in the Women's League is a job.

That's why being there to have fun is a mistake.

So long as we're receiving money, there's a certain responsibility we have to uphold.

That responsibility, simply put, is to continue playing even if we're not having a good time. We are all playing to win, but only one of the 100 Women's League players can go without losing in the end.

Everyone else gets the unnecessary label pressed onto them.

So, if there is ever a fun moment, it's when we reach the goal.

The moment when we didn't lose to anyone.

Basically when we win a title.

"..... You said there are 50,000 problems in there, right? Who made them? 'Cuz I've sure never seen that absurd number of copyright-free Shogi puzzles just show up somewhere."

"..... It was a present... from him"

I can tell who he is by the look on her face.

Because I had the same thing happen back when I was Shorty's age. I was so happy to get homework from a professional Shogi player I admired that I was solving those Shogi puzzles in my sleep.

I'd be willing to bet that I made the same face she is now when I was solving them. I was pretty much on cloud nine, like he'd written me a love letter.

But if I ever had a chance to meet the girl I was back then, there's one thing I would say to her....

But that's Shogi.

GOAL

“Natagiri-sensei. You have one hour remaining.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you.”

I thank the match recorder and then cast my gaze back to my opponent.

There’s the Meijin I suppose I should refer to him as the Monarch in this instance, yes? There’s the Monarch running his hands through his hair as he stares blankly at the board.

Now, in this series of matches, I have made a new discovery about him.

—When you’re truly backed into a corner you make that agonized face, don’t you?

We’ve done research together for upwards of ten years now.

How surprising it is that there are tidbits I still don’t know about him.

On the other hand, this could just be a coincidence.

Because, well, I got swept away when I fought him for the Crown Title four years ago.

“He-he After everything I said to Ai, it turns out I let myself be swallowed up by my opponent’s status”

Every move he made terrified me to no end.

I was certain that every single one was the best move.

All it took was seeing a little quiver in his fingers to know he was going to win.

That is, until a computer taught me otherwise. Software rated the infallible god’s Shogi for me.

And I have seen his late-game magic many, many times already.

—A little girl in grade school can play better than this, you know?

The Monarch looks to be suffering. He can’t seem to sit still, and groans leak from his half-open mouth every few minutes.

What a disgraceful sight.

—Have no fear I'll make it quick.

“Natagiri-sensei, you have 50 minutes remaining.”

“Yes.”

I reach for my piece stand and pluck one off the top.

Then I bring it down onto the board to mercifully finish off a wounded enemy like warriors did on battlefields of yore.

My blade pierces what I thought it would never reach—the neck of a god.

“You’ve been knockin’ it out of the park recently, Tamayon! Your YouTube subscribers have shot through the roof and you’re going to as many events as ever!”

“Aha-ha! ☆ Why, thaaaank you!”

The Third Monarch Title Match is being held in Ibaraki Prefecture.

The elementary school girl and I got called in to work the big board and do commentary.

Since we’re doing collab livestreams, customers poured into the venue for a chance to have an instructional match with us. It sure cut into our time to do commentary, though.

“You’ve got a Women’s Legend League match the day after tomorrow, and yet here you are working an event! You’re a real star!”

“Oh, stop. ☆ This is an important part of the job——.”

“Isn’t that why you dropped two in a row? All those nights messing around on YouTube are catching up to you.”

“..... I guess so! ☆ Aha-ha-ha!”

I smile and keep the conversation going. An empty, dry, forced smile.

The guy talking to me right now is a regular for my instructional matches.

I’d say he’s about amateur 2-*dan*, and he always challenges me to even matches. He’s getting an instructional match from the elementary school girl at

the moment, but that doesn't stop him from talking to me.

"This little girl still has plenty of time, but now might be the last chance you ever get!! You've really got to put your nose to the grindstone! I'm saying this for your own good, Tamayon!"

He's not trying to be mean or anything.

In his eyes, he's giving me helpful advice. This is encouragement. This right here.

That's why I can't get angry at him. So I smile with a big "Thaaank you! ☆," to keep his instructional match going and send him home happy. Another customer just like him is waiting to take his place.

My smile must put him in a great mood because he keeps going, even louder than before.

"I have to say though, the crowd is small for one of the Meijin's title matches. Then again, I suppose people don't need to show up for Natagiri anyway! He used to be a young, handsome player on the rise, but that mantle goes to players like Ayumu Kannabe or Taishi Shinokubo now. Naniwa's Snow White running away was a major blow to the Shogi world, don't you think? If you ask me, she should have to redo the Sub League if one loss was enough to make her run away. But, I get how losing to a Women's League player would be a heck of a shock——."

Snap.

"It's your move," says the elementary school girl as dry echoes fade.

The regular leans over the board and says, "I'm in check, huh? Ahh, I see what your plan is. But there's this little expression: inadequate checks are worse than not moving at all. It means that putting your opponent in check before you're ready is as good as wasting your turn——."

"How do you mean? This match is already over."

"Huh?"

Don't do it, Shorty

"I read it a long time ago. You mean, you can't tell? It's only a 19-move

[illegible]

“Okay, stop, stop. This conversation is over.”

“Mrghhghh! Mngghhhhh?!!”

The elementary school girl squirms like a big tuna fish while I hold her mouth shut. In the meantime I apologize as best I can to my regular customer.

“Please excuse this little one! ☆ She’s really into Shogi puzzles. And you know kids: if there’s one thing they like to do, it’s show off! She’s only 11, so don’t take it too personally, okay?”

“Um Well, i-it is checkmate

The customer stands up with a snakebitten look on his face. Seeing his King be magically warped into checkmate has him too shocked to be mad or surprised.

Now then.

How to deal with this elementary school girl who just insulted her customer.

“Thank you for getting mad for me is what you were expecting me to say, is it?!”

“Mghhngghhh! Manghh!!”

“Yes, yes, I know. Your blood is boiling, isn’t it? But you know something? That man loves Shogi. That’s why we can’t do or say anything that might change that.”

“But!!”

She yells after breaking free of my hold.

“But Rokuroba-sensei, you’re really strong! You beat me easily!! He needed to realize that——.”

“All he’d say is tell me when you have a title. You get it, right? Besides, there are hundreds and hundreds of customers just like him.”

“..... You’re only working today because the office called you You only agreed because they pleaded with you, saying *they* need a well-known

Women's League player to boost attendance no matter what, and you gave up an all-important day to practice for your match so that Natagiri-sensei's event could bring in more people——."

Suddenly.

"That's the signal: the Monarch has surrendered. The Challenger Natagiri 8-dan has claimed his second victory and is now one win away from claiming his first title!"

An announcement booms over the intercom and, for some reason, I lose my composure.

"A title is a must. Got that? Then finally"

"..... Finally?"

Jin-Jin dominated the Third Monarch Title Match.

Both players went to do board analysis because the match ended so early, but I didn't see them because I was on break to rest up for the next event.

"She doesn't have the right mindset, plain and simple. She doesn't have the drive to put food on the table with Shogi."

Instructional matches are done, and I'm in the break room to relax a little before the next event. One of the Women's players I'm on good terms with and I are chatting over a late lunch.

"She went out of her way to humiliate one of the customers. I don't care how angry you are, that's something you just don't do. You have to be sneaky about it! Like ignoring check paths and tormenting them all the way to the end!"

"Don't you think you're, like, expecting a little too much out of her?"

"She's not some average kid, remember? She's already in the Women's League."

Listening to my rant is Rin Koiiji Women's 4-dan.

Fans adoringly call her Rinrin. She and I go to the same university, so we have more in common than just Shogi. She's just about the only Women's League player I can open up to like this.

She's always been the type everybody loves. She's even close to that Ryou Tsukiyomizaka, believe it or not.

"You made it to the Women's League as an elementary school student, so you get what I'm staying, right Rinrin? About how much she doesn't understand."

"I Well, my father was rather strict."

From where I'm sitting, Women's League players can be divided into two groups.

Those who come from strict families and those who were spoiled by everyone.

Rinrin came from the living definition of a strict family. Her father was a dominant force in amateur Shogi, and he forced her to practice until she literally broke down crying. I never saw it myself, but I heard that he chewed her out at the top of his lungs in front of everyone at a big tournament when she was little. Apparently, her next opponent felt so sorry for her that they lost on purpose.

The only reason that the child of someone that dedicated to Shogi didn't enter the Sub League was because a generational talent by the name of Tsubasa Gakumeki was already there.

When comparing the first elementary school-aged Women's League player and first female member of the Sub League nicknamed Undying Wing to his own daughter, the overbearing father had this to say: *Your measly talent doesn't stand a chance against that prodigy. Go into the Women's League.*

If that were me, I would've quit Shogi altogether.

"If there's one thing my father always said it was: claiming a title just once will change your life Being told I wasn't good enough hurt quite a lot."

"Not breaking under that pressure and claiming the Women's title is what makes you amazing, Rinrin."

"It was totally the timing. I've been told it's a fake title because Tsubasa Gakumeki and Ryou Tsukiyomizaka were both in the Sub League."

"That's not"

“But they’re right,” she says plainly. “I only had it once, but that gave me 3-*dan* overnight. I built up enough victory stars since then to become 4-*dan* at my age. *I don’t have to live with my parents anymore, and the pressure is, like, finally off. I can play the way I want to play without worrying about winning every time.*”

—That’s the luxury people who’ve claimed a title have. That leeway

It’s kind of like the athlete who won a gold medal, retired right away, got a gig in broadcasting and is now living the life.

Rinrin’s bestowing ceremony has become the stuff of legends.

She wore a gorgeous kimono, but never stopped crying once she was up on stage. It wasn’t long before everyone there started bawling along with her. It was a really touching ceremony.

Until a certain point, anyway.

“*Would you tell us the meaning behind those tears?*” The MC posed the question.

And this was Rinrin’s answer: “*Now it’s just such a relief that now I get to play Shogi without worrying that my father is going to berate me*”

Of course, her father was in attendance and became the recipient of lots of awkward stares.

Never once have I wished that my father was that strict. Actually, he’s an awesome dad who’s quite the looker for his age and dotes on me all the time Still, I wish someone had taught me sooner.

Taught me that life without ever winning a title is the definition of pain.

Here I am having lunch with Rinrin, but

Really, I’m so jealous of her I could die!!

I want a title!! I want to reach the goal!!

If I do, I can be one of those people who everyone loves: like Rinrin!! I’ll be free to play the way I want to play without the pressure!!

Rinrin lost her title after only one season and hasn’t really come close to claiming another one since.

—Then what are my chances considering we're the same age?

My university classmates are lining up jobs with big companies one after another. I, on the other hand, have chosen to walk the path of a Women's League player.

With the status that comes with a title attached to my name, I can stay friends with everyone and still enjoy Shogi.

But I'll only ever be a run-of-the-mill Women's League player at this rate and I'll regret my decision someday

Jin-Jin is only one win away from a title, and that alone makes me jealous.

I can't even be happy for someone else's success How miserable is that?

—Big Sister Azami, too Deep down I envied her like no other

Having a child means spending a long time away from Shogi.

What's worse is that childbearing age and the time period when a player is at her peak overlap.

Yeah, we get maternity leave, but all it does is make it so we don't have to forfeit matches. Someone else plays them but they don't earn victory stars and money for us.

—That's why, even if they get married the number of Women's players who decide to have children is

I think taking the ultimate title of the first Queen played a big part in the Thorn Princess' decision. Losing her title allowed her to step away from Shogi.

Meanwhile, Women's Legend Rina Shakando hasn't gotten married or given birth.

"..... I wonder if she's happy? Keeping that title for all these years"

"Shakando-sensei? She's totally had a rough time. I mean, she has pretty much sacrificed her personal life and devoted herself entirely to Shogi and all."

But all the Kanto Women's League players know that she came oh so close to getting married at one point.

The guy was a widower, a professional player with child of his own. Shakando-

sensei seemed enthusiastic about it, but

Then there's the Meijin. He's maintained titles just like she has, but he's married and has children of his own. Not to mention all the books he's written, his Citizen's Award and all the fame and money that comes with those things.

Shakando-*sensei*, on the other hand, is alone. What's the difference?

We Women's players get paid less per match and have fewer matches to begin with.

Now that even more women are joining the league, we're getting paid less and less every match. That's why it's become necessary to find alternate sources of income to live on.

Working as match recorders, attending events, match commentary, instructional lessons or working with Shogi clubs in big companies to name a few.

Unfortunately, there are only so many jobs within the Shogi world Taking one of them means taking money from someone else.

How could anyone ever humiliate a customer during an instructional match if they understood that? Impossible, right?

Which brings me back to my first point.

"Maybe kids from rich families just turn out like that? The elementary school girl is staying with me at the moment, but she's got that luxurious inn to fall back on in case things go south. She'd have all the freedom in the world there."

"Those from families with deep pockets do have a certain carefree air about them. Like Machi, for example."

"Machi Kugui"

That name came from so far out of left field, I thought I was hearing things.

"..... She is a bit of a mystery. Comes from a noble family, has her own title, works as a journalist"

She's two years younger than me but has already acquired the status of Eternal Queen for holding the Yamashiro Ouka title so long.

She's reached so many goals already that most Women's League players

would never reach even if they could redo their lives over and over. There's a constant aloofness to her, like nothing gets under her skin.

Is it possible that she feels the same pressure and jealousy that I do?

I put on my Tamayon face and head back to the event even though there are still some pent-up feelings I want to get off my chest.

It's time to sign autographs.

A personalized autograph is ¥3,000. An autographed fan, ¥10,000. As far as work goes, this is as easy as it gets. Get paid and free food, thank you! ☆

"Ah, Rokuroba-sensei! Lots of customers are already waiting!"

"Ah, the life of a popular Women's League player is so hard."

The elementary school girl is next to me. The line for her autograph is also snaking all the way across the room Well, the organizers have to put the popular players together. Otherwise one is really busy while the others have no customers. It gets awkward, painfully awkward when that happens, so this is easier in a way.

"..... Hm?"

I catch a glimpse of the elementary school girl's handwriting.

In characters beautiful enough to make me sick, she's written out customer requests like awakening girl and loli-konichiwa Should I be worried?

What draws my eyes even more though is: "! Hey, that——."

Her personalized stamp: she's putting it in the upper right of each one.

Mukyoku. Boundless.

As in: there's no limit to any direction you go.

Basically there is no limit to how strong you can become.

It's a direct, pure desire for strength. An earnest wish for more power and the determination to follow that path until the end of time in order to get it.

Except that the stamp's red ink is giving me a different message.

The goal doesn't exist.

I thought everything would be easier if I only had a title.

Fans would get off my case and there would be a clear line between me and other Women's League players Most of all, I thought it would satisfy my pride.

So I visualized what life would be like once I had claimed a title and worked hard to make it happen.

—Where did that effort get me?

I'm wearing an empty smile and going through the motions, playing lifeless Shogi to attract customers, all while counting up how much money I'm getting from the autographs I've signed.

The effort that came from loving Shogi, hating to lose and trying to get strong enough so no one could beat me at some point it got replaced with finding a way to make a living while still holding on to Shogi as if my life depended on it.

—That's not the same thing, is it?

Did I become a Women's League player for this?

Do the Meijin, Shakando-*sensei* and Jin-Jin keep on playing Shogi for *this*?

No, definitely not.

“..... How about that. I'm the one with the wrong mindset”

At some point I must've gotten scared of getting serious.

That's why I take jobs just before my matches. Because, really, if I commit myself 110 percent and still come up short there's no excuse.

That's how I could pretend to have given it my all even though my effort was going into the wrong place

I was the one talking down to her for not having the right mindset, but she's taking me to school. What right do I have when I can't even follow my own advice?

“Shorty. Where did you get that stamp?”

“This one here? After talking about it with Master, he gave it to me as a present when I became a Women’s League player.”

That lolicon is actually pretty smart! I should’ve figured the youngest title holder ever would have a good head on his shoulders. He’s not your typical lolicon.

“Give it to me.”

“Whaaa?!”

“What’s the problem? You can just make another one! Oh, here! You can have mine.”

Mine’s a proverb by the way: *yukini taete bai-ka uruwashi*. It means beauty through hardship or something like that... I think?

“Yours is only two characters. Mine’s five. That’s more than double, you know? That’s a bargain if you ask me.”

“No, it’s not! Why do I have to trade with you in the first place?!”

“There are collectors who go nuts for autographs and fans. Change your stamp or win a title, and they’ll buy even more!”

Once I’ve coerced that stamp out of the elementary school girl, I slap it onto the whole line of autographs and yell for the whole venue to hear.

“You folks are just in time! Today could be the last chance you’ll have to get an autograph from Tamayo Rokuroba *Women’s 2-dan*! I’ll be writing Women’s Legend next time, and *3-dan* after that even if I lose the title!”

“Well said!”

“Tamayon! I’ll take one!”

“Put me down for two!!”

Customers push their way over into my line. There’s no going back now!

The customer who had that incident earlier buys both a fan and an autograph from me.

“Whoa!!”

And he notices right away.

“That’s a new stamp! Now this is what I was hoping for!!”

“This?”

“This new attitude! We can’t get behind you if you don’t have that I’ll get stronger even if it kills me mentality!”

I lean over to whisper into the elementary school girl’s ear.

“See? Isn’t he a good person?”

“..... I don’t think he’s a bad person, no.”

She still doesn’t look convinced but agrees anyway. Sure, I think he could choose his words better.

But the fact that he’s rooting for me makes me happy all the same.

How long has it been since I was genuinely happy to get encouragement from a fan?

“Boundless, boundless for sure. I swore I’d take revenge on that younger sister apprentice of yours. I’ve got a lot of beefing up to do.”

“On Ten-chan?”

“Yes. I said right to that cheeky little runt’s face during the Mynavi Preliminaries:I don’t care if it’s 40 years from now, I’ll get stronger and beat you!!☆”

“I think you would still have a difficult time beating Ten-chan 40 years from now, Sensei

“Oh, shut up!!”

Drawing an ink circle on her puffed up cheek, I swear to myself that I *will* become strong.

And during the eighth round of the Women’s Legend League two days later my losing streak comes to an end.

CRAMMING

“..... I can’t write,” I say with my head in my hands during our fifth meeting.

We’re at an old restaurant that specializes in softshell turtle soup. Not only does it show up in novels like Naoya Shiga’s *A Dark Night’s Passing* and Yasunari Kawabata’s *Koto*, but it’s also said that the Shinsengumi themselves ate here about 150 years ago.

Even slurping on the most nutritious soup in all of Kyoto—*maru-nabe* as it’s called—doesn’t inspire me to write

On a side note, we had our third meeting at a *sukiyaki* restaurant that’s been in business for over 200 years and our fourth was at a restaurant specializing in exotic meats that was founded back in the 1910s. We had private rooms both times.

“..... I’m really really sorry about this. You’ve picked up so many tabs already”

“Pay it no mind. My editor has instructed me to spare no expense in order to bag Yaichi Kuzuryu, so you have nothing to worry about.”

Such high expectations and I can’t deliver. Man, I feel pathetic

“Where are you writing?”

“Cafés or family restaurants, mostly, I thought a change of scenery might help, but I get self-conscious when other people are around. It feels like they’re all trying to read my work”

I scramble to hide my screen whenever a waiter comes by to refill my water or passes by my seat, so I never make any progress at all.

It reminds me of the shared computer I used at Master’s place when I was a live-in apprentice. It seemed like anytime I searched for hot videos, Ginko or Keika would walk in and I had to scramble to close the windows before they saw, Unfortunately, my search history gave it away and I had to face their wrath. Considering that Ginko called me Big Boobichi after that, it’s not too

hard to figure out what I typed into the search bar.

“If concentration is the issue, why not write at home?”

“I would, but there’s a reason why I can’t get any work done at home

Akira always comes up to me saying: Sensei, if you are here, that means you have spare time, yes? Teach me Shogi!” That lady seems like she has a ton of time in her hands when Ai is at school

And——

“After talking with you, I have so many ideas in my head and I can’t wait to type them all out! But when I actually sit down in front of the computer the words that were in my head before aren’t there anymore

My whole reason for writing about software comes down to one conversation.

Something that Futatsuzuka 4-*dan* said to me.

“You, meanwhile, seem to have merged with the sequences software produces. Thought processes that shouldn’t exist seem to take the form as hallucinations within your mind, honing some kind of deviant sense For some reason, Yaichi Kuzuryu, you keep winning with figments that would normally be dismissed as delusions.”

He even said I’m even more dangerous than Ika So I thought I’d show him what’s going on in my head, but

Are these delusions after all

“Words you had in your head, you say?”

Cleaning up her place in the table, Machi pulls something out of the bag at her side.

“Kuzuryu-sensei. How about this method?”

“Huh?”

She spreads a cloth Shogi board over the table and starts lining up pieces as she asks, “This formation. If I were in this situation, I would play this move here. Do you have any thoughts?”

“Oh, that new *yagura* sequence.”

This cloth board that I assume Machi uses for her own research has a sheen to it, almost like it was made out of kimono fabric. The pieces have been used so much that they practically glide into my fingertips.

“This is extremely good against a defender’s rapid attack. The introduction of software changed the way *yagura* strategies are used in the same way that the introduction of muskets changed how castles were defended. If you think of the big pieces like a musket’s line of fire, then software builds *yagura* to increase their range and firepower. Now, as for how the offense contends with the defender’s muskets, they bring the right Gold way up to the front and make a Gold Yagura BUT! leave the King in the starting position without advancing into the defensive formation itself. They also leave the right Silver where it is so that the big pieces don’t get blocked. That way the Rook is free to move horizontally. And the Bishop can move anywhere it wants because there’s no defensive formation around the King that’s in its way. Pros tend to agree that it doesn’t work well on offense and gives the defender an advantage. But presto change-o! See? It can be used by offense as well. Actually, I think it gives the offense a clear advantage.”

“You can do it just fine.”

“Do what?”

“While I would like a clear explanation of the presto change-o part, that was a very interesting explanation. Using muskets as a metaphor was clear and easy to understand.”

“..... Then that’s the kind of thing you’re looking for?”

“Yes. Put what you said in writing and I can use it as is. Next time, please use a voice recorder.”

“B-But books are supposed to have, I don’t know, literary techniques and sweeping expressions——.”

“Shogi books become more valuable the easier they are to understand. This is because more people are able to pick them up.”

Machi spells this out for me in nice, short words as if I was a kid.

“Sweeping expressions and literary techniques have a purpose in novels. The trick with Shogi books, however, is making the complicated sections easy and fun to read. We would like children who aren’t adept at reading to enjoy Kuzuryu’s Notebook as well.”

“Ah!”

She’s exactly right.

I read through the Meijin’s strategy books enough times to wear out the pages when I was little, but I could only read the basic characters and numbers back then. I probably only understood about half the content, if that.

Even so, I was excited with every turn of the page and couldn’t wait to try out the strategies written on each page in a match

—I get to write a book like that!!

I had no idea what I was going to write just a few minutes ago But now I can’t wait to get started. All sorts of ideas and images are flooding into my head. This is intense!!

Is this the power of an editor?!

“Please continue like this. Do you think you will be able to make the deadline, even if it’s last minute?”

“B-But that’s the thing! I don’t know if you’re just that good at inspiring me, but I don’t think I could reach this point working alone”

“In that case do you think you could complete it if I provided support just like this?”

“A-Actually, yes. It would be sooo much better than trying to do it on my own But that’s not an option, is it? I mean, the Women’s Legend League is in full swing and you’ve got to get ready to defend your title as Yamashiro Ouka”

“..... It’s true that I cannot make a large time commitment. However there is one method that may be an option.” Machi pauses for just a moment before saying, “A cramming session.”

“C-Cramming?”

“You confine yourself within a room at a rural inn with nothing else to do but

write. I will provide additional support in person.”

Oh! That’s what she meant. That’s what publishers have their popular authors or manga artists do as a last resort when they’re behind on their deadlines.

Whoa. I’m going to get the famous author treatment! That’s what goes through my head when I make a very important connection——.

“Huh?! Wait a sec!! Hold up!!”

A realization that turns me pale as a ghost.

“S-So basically we’d be staying in the same room for days on end?!”

“There’s no other method to quickly complete a manuscript when there’s a time crunch.”

Don’t concern yourself with me——is what she’s saying.

“I am under strict orders from my editor: spare no expense in order to bag Yaichi Kuzuryu.”

“So you see, I’ll be doing a cramming session at some inn for while,” I inform my live-in apprentice as soon as I get back to the apartment.

Ai Yashajin, dressed in black lace, wearing something like a negligee, doesn’t put her phone down. Instead she looks up with her eyes and asks, “Some inn?”

“I don’t know for sure, but if I had to guess, probably somewhere in the Kyoto area Most likely an old one where some famous author from a long time ago did a cramming session of their own yeah.”

“With whom? You’re not going alone, are you?”

“M- My editor”

“.....”

The pain! The silence and stare hurt like hell!!

I bet that Ai already knows who I’m working with to write the book. I’d also wager she knows who came up with the idea in the first place.

And, of course, she realizes the potential for this cramming session to take on a whole new, dirtier meaning.

Why would this business trip turn raunchy? Because Machi's entire being is raunchy, that's why. Raunchy x hot spring inn = boobs. That equation balances perfectly.

Seriously That thought crossed my mind when Machi first brought up the cramming session. Like, "oh crap." Not about the impending deadline, but my ability to think rationally. If the guy who's going into the cramming session can't even trust himself, then there's absolutely zero chance Ai Yashajin will, right? Yep, this is checkmate

"Oh, that's fine. It's work, after all."

"HUH?! Are you sure?"

"You're going there to work. That editor of yours isn't going on the trip for immoral reasons, I assume?"

"Of course not! It's work for both of us! Work!!"

I shake my head from side to side and repeat the word work like a broken record.

"Besides, you stay in the same hotel as Women League players when you have title matches, correct? If I worried about every little possibility, there would be no end to it. We'd just tire ourselves out," says Ai as she flips her hair over her shoulder. "I was planning to go on a bit of a trip myself. I'll plan it around your schedule."

"Speaking of that, where are you going when you leave on these trips of yours?"

We're living together on paper, but the amount of time she and I are in this apartment at the same time is extremely small.

Ai Yashajin is in the same grade as Ai Hinatsuru, but they act completely differently. My second apprentice hasn't had friends over to hang out and have fun ever once so lonely No, no, no! I'm saying as a grade school girl she must be lonely, okay? That's what I mean!

She's the one who set my curfew, but she tends to break it quite a lot. That's why we hardly see each other, and it doesn't feel like we live together. All these extra rooms in the apartment sure don't help.

“Where, you ask? I’m working. Perfectly normal.”

“Normal, but not for grade schoolers.”

“Preparations are underway for me to take over the family business while I have time. What choice do I have since the Queen and Women’s Throne leagues aren’t being played? Now come on, get out your planner.”

“R-Right

Ai opens a calendar app on her phone while I pull out my pocket planner.

When, from out of nowhere, Ai smiles with a heh.

“..... Odd, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“Rather than spending time together at home it feels more like we live together when we align our schedules like this.”

“.....!”

Those words felt like a rabbit punch out of nowhere. My heart jumps into my throat.

There’s no way Ai Hinatsuru would’ve ever knowingly let me go to a cramming session with Machi. Big Sis would’ve acted like she was okay with it, but would’ve held a major grudge against Machi until she had utterly destroyed her in a Shogi match.

But, Ai Yashajin not only did she allow it, but she’s shackled my heart at the same time.

A shackle called trust.

RECORD 4

九頭竜八一

YAICHI
KUZURYU

供御飯万智

MACHI
KUGUI

TIME SLIP

A special express train is sitting in the back corner of Kyoto Station.

“This is it, right?”

It’s so far out on the edge of the platform that I’m starting to doubt myself while I wait for Machi Kugui to arrive. It’s not like her to show up late for anything.

“Still, I never thought I’d be doing a cramming session there of all places. I was sure we’d be somewhere in Kyoto proper——.”

When suddenly.....

“Ryuo-*saaan!* ≡”

Booouuunce. Booouuunce. I’m not the only one captivated by the beautiful young woman bounding her way through the station. Pretty much everyone is looking at her.

“My preparations *pant pant* took longer than I anticipated

Running late, Machi shows up with her hair down but glasses on. She’s right in between her Shogi player and journalist selves.

“I was unable to put my face on Oh, how embarrassing this is, to be seen in such a state of disarray

Pulling two huge suitcases behind her, Machi is wearing a form-fitting knit sweater. It really amplifies her chest.

“That’s a lot of luggage you’re carrying

Glancing (peripherally) at the two sets of things weighing her down, I thank her for her tremendous effort.

Why do glasses and long black hair go so well together? For that matter, why do knit sweaters and huge boobs knock men to their knees like a one-two combo punch?

My eyes glued to the living definition of attractive, I ask, “I-Is this the right train?”

“Aye. The first car.”

Suitcases rolling behind us, we head to the front of the train.

The first half of that train car is designated as the business-class Green Car. It looks like Machi reserved seats for us here.

“Not a soul around We have it all to ourselves?”

“Weekdays tend to be this way.”

Well, we have the Green Car to ourselves. The thing is that the seat numbers printed on our tickets are right next to each other.

Hmmm

We’re allowed to sit further apart at times like this when no one else is around right? This is a business trip and I have a girlfriend That is, assuming she hasn’t dumped me yet

“Kuzuryu-sensei.”

Machi speaks in her journalist voice while pulling on my sleeve and adjusting her glasses with her left hand at the same time.

“I did not reserve the Green Car in order for you to enjoy the view. It was so that you would have the perfect writing environment to complete even one more word before our arrival. I shall be supporting you along the way. Now please, take a seat.”

“Oh, right.”

And so, I get pulled into the seat right next to Machi.

The train leaves the station as I’m setting up my laptop. Naturally curious, I take a look out the window and Machi asks, “Is this your first time on the Sagano Line?”

“I think so. I’ve never had a title match in this direction.”

This line stops at stations like Kameoka and Fukuchiyama, so we must be going north.

“Big Sis and I went to classrooms all over the country when we were kids, but we usually went further west, around Okayama or Hiroshima. That’s where the

strong classrooms were.”

“It’s time to refocus.”

“Oh, right.”

And so, nothing but the soft clicks of the new author’s keyboard fill the air.

The beautiful editor’s eyes are glued to it.

I can’t slack off for an instant, not while I’m being watched like this. Not only does she announce every typo as it happens, but she also points out all my bad typing habits as inefficient. Huh? Is this some kind of torture?

The pages are filling up, but my speed starts falling after a while——.

“It seems like you’re losing concentration. Perhaps now would be a good time to eat the lunches I purchased at the station to replenish nutrients.”

“Yay! I love those station lunches. What kind did you——.”

“Don’t move!”

Machi issues a stern warning just as I’m about to get out of my seat. Then she says the last thing I ever expected.

“I will feed you, so please continue working. Keep your eyes on the screen and your fingers on the keys.”

“Huuuuh?! I-I couldn’t possibly——.”

“Now, say ahh.”

“Um ahh

“Fingers on the keys.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Chewing food. Gulping tea. Clicking keys.

I feel like a patient in a hospital or something. For some reason, Machi leaning over to ask, “Is it good?” every so often feels familiar somehow.

She must be thinking the same thing.

“In the past, I invited you to accompany me on a Shogi retreat soon after the Elementary Meijin Tournament came to a close, Ryuo-san. While there, I served

you food while you were engrossed in a match, just like this. He-he-he.”

“Ah!”

Now I remember.

I wanted to keep playing even though it was dinner time. The problem was that the *onigiri* rice balls they gave us didn’t have seaweed around the outside. I didn’t want to get the pieces dirty, so Machi feed me instead.

Wow, that brings back memories

“Now that you mention it, yes. Back then, having a girl like you, Ma-ch Machi, spoiling me like that felt brand new. I think that’s why I took you up on the offer.”

I let the words pour out of my mouth as I relived the memories in my head.

“The only other girls my age back then demanded that I do everything for them

“As in Ginko and O-Ryou?”

“I’m not allowed to say their names.”

I close my mouth and get back to work. Now’s not the time for pointless conversation.

Click, click, click!

Getting to a good stopping point, I take a look at the newly completed part of my manuscript and am pleasantly surprised by how much I got done.

“..... Not bad for two hours, don’t you think?”

“In my experience, during transit tends to be the most productive time to work,” Machi says with a satisfied nod. My progress has put her in a good mood.

“I I think I can do this! I’ll hit the ground running as soon as we get to the inn!!”

“He-he. See to it you do.”

My beautiful editor then pats my head. This balance between carrot and stick

is addictive. So this is how I'll get used to being under her thumb

That passes through my head as the train comes to a stop.

"Huh? Are we there already?"

"It's the next station. However——," says Machi as she removes her glasses and returns to her normal way of speaking. "The train shall reverse course from where we are at Miyazu Station. As it is only a few minutes, there is no need to change the seating alignment."

Just as she said, the train started going backwards.

It's an odd sensation.

"..... Going backward like this feels like a time slip, doesn't it?"

"Time slip?"

"Yeah. Everything out the window going backward makes it feel like time itself is going in reverse

Next thing we know, we'll be kids again."

Maybe I'm tired from working too much?

Is part of writing a book looking deep into yourself and reviving old memories?

"Back to childhood"

That comment did come out of nowhere. Maybe she's confused?

Machi quietly whispers, "..... Ryuo-san. Do you ever wish for a chance to relive your life? To correct the mistakes you've made thus far"

"I'm not sure. I've made so many mistakes already. It'd be nice to have a Mulligan on quite a few of the bad moves that I've made recently. Ha-ha-ha."

But I have a feeling that things would come out pretty much the same even if I did get a do-over.

Sure, some of the details might be different.

At the end of the day, though Ginko would still have disappeared and Ai still would have left.

"It's the same in Shogi, don't you think? Since you do so much research in order to play the best move at the time, the record would still turn out identical

even if you got to play the match over again. You tend to mess up in the same spots.”

“Ryuo-*san*

Machi is looking at me as if she just had her heart broken.

I can’t take it and break the silence.

“But since we can’t slip back in time anyway, it’s pointless talking about it. Sorry about that, Machi——.”

“Would you like to try? A time slip.”

“Huh?”

Her fingers slip in between mine.

Then, like back when we first met, she calls me by my name.

“We have arrived. Yaichi.”

Just like back then, she sounds a little shy.

■ CONSTRUCTION

“One of the Three Great Views of Japan, Amanohashidate, is visible over there.”

“Whooooaaa!!”

A spectacular view spreads out beneath me. A path of white sand covered in pine trees is running out over the water.

This is our last stop—Amanohashidate.

It’s right up there in fame alongside Matsushima and Miyajima. Of course, it’s my first time here.

Since we can’t check in just yet, Machi and I leave our luggage in coin lockers and go to the aptly named observation deck: Amanohashidate View Land.

Machi takes a few pictures of me with that amazing scenery in the background as she says, “Amanohashidate has another name: Hiriyukan. Viewing it like this from above makes it appear as though a dragon is flying through the sky due to the reflection of blue light on all sides. That’s how it got its name.”

“Yeah, I can see that. I guess this is the perfect place for finishing Kuzuryu’s Notebook, eh?”

“He-he. This spot may one day be part of the legend that is Yaichi Kuzuryu.”

I have to say, though, there are tons of couples on the observation deck.

Amid all the selfie sticks and couples trying to get the perfect picture, a normal guy like me getting his picture taken over and over by an absolute bombshell like Machi really sticks out like a sore thumb.

“W-We, um, are getting a lot of attention”

“Photographs are essential when making a book. They’ll be used for the cover and about the author page. We are working.”

Machi issues even more directions on what pose I should take and shoots another round of pictures.

That fleeting moment just before we got off the train when she called me Yaichi has already disappeared from my mind.

It might've been my imagination all along.

Just some wishful thinking while I took a stroll down memory lane

"Of course, there's the observation deck right next to the station! It really hammers home that this is one of the Three Great Views of Japan! There's even a souvenir shop and a small amusement park next door."

"The inn is only a three-minute walk from here," adds Machi as she looks down at her watch. "Let's be on our way. It's time to check in."

"Whoa! Who would've thought a room this nice would be all the way out here in the countryside?"

Machi arranged a historical, traditional style inn right along the shoreline for me.

My cramming session will take place in the corner room on the second floor.

"This view of Amanohashidate is perfect! I could write tons of manuscripts in here!!"

"I see. Then I will proceed with construction."

"C-Construction?"

Ignoring me, Machi flips open her suitcases.

She starts pulling things out one after another. A computer, electrical cords, tape, the works. None of them would show up on a typical girl's vacation.

It's no wonder she was late. Packing up all this stuff must've taken forever. No wonder her makeup is so light

My train of thought runs rampant as Machi transforms the room into a writing studio before my eyes.

"Woow It looks like the title match starts in here at any moment"

"It takes more than a pen and paper to write a book nowadays. The authors of old didn't have that problem," Machi explains as she organizes the cords. "Additionally, many of the venues that host title matches have facilities that are

just as dated as this inn. All Go and Shogi journalists must be able to do this much in order to do their job.”

In other words, the only reason I can have a cramming session in this rural area is because Machi has visited so many inns during her time working as a journalist It really drives home how lucky I am to have her as my editor.

“Okay! Time to get cracking!!”

I pull out my laptop, put it on the table and psych myself up to get to work.

“Ah, before I forget, I’d like to charge my phone. What socket can I use?”

“I will be holding on to your phone. It will only be a distraction.”

“HUH?! B-But c’mon. How else am I supposed to check the latest match records——?”

“I will find whatever information you need whenever you ask. This is a cramming session, Sensei. All of your means of communication with the outside world must be severed.”

“Yeah, but, um Wh-what if someone tries to get a hold of me, but can’t——?”

“Who would that be? Your live-in apprentice has left the nest and your girlfriend abandoned you.”

“Ow, ow, owwww.”

My living with Ai Yashajin is a secret, so there’s nothing I can say back.

“Whose fault is it that a cramming session was necessary?”

“M-Mine”

“Who was it that came crying to me saying they can’t write without me around?”

“Th- That was me”

“Think of this as a title match and devote yourself entirely to writing, okay?”
(grin)

She takes my wallet as well while she’s at it.

Huh?

No phone or money in an unfamiliar town? Am I a hostage?

The severity of the situation is finally starting to dawn on me, but Machi has one more shock in store.

"Next is oh, yes. We must have the futons removed from the closet in order to secure space for you to work. I'll contact the front desk to——."

"Hold up! Where am I going to sleep?!"

"Eating and sleeping will be done next door. Doing so in here would only clutter the space."

Oh yeah. She reserved that room, too.

Of course she did. We may be working, but that's no reason for a man and a woman to share a room.

But I thought she would be sleeping in there.

"Th-Then where are you going to sleep, Machi?"

"I plan on sleeping next door, as well." She then takes off her glasses and lightly nibbles on the end as she whispers, "by the way there's only one futon."

"D-Does that mean?!"

"Yes, just what you think it means, Sensei"

Her airy voice makes my imagination run wild!

An inn in the countryside. An *onsen* hot spring.

A beautiful but pent-up editor, her childhood friend and writer-to-be.

Two people doing a cramming session in a single room to complete a manuscript.

But... a sudden case of writer's block.....!

Desperate to stimulate him in any way possible, she peels back her inhibitions to become the ultimate muse——.

"Sensei I won't be letting you sleep tonight."

And the two come together that night Uniting like the Amanohashidate

land bridge itself!!

All this was just a figment of my imagination.

“I will be sleeping while you are awake, and I will be keeping you awake while I’m awake, Sensei.”

“So, I won’t be getting any sleep?”

“Precisely.”

P-Precisely

My skilled editor smiles as she gestures toward the writing jail she’s built for me.

“Don’t believe for a moment that you will have a good night’s sleep until that manuscript is finished, Se-n-sei.≡”

She doesn’t mean tonight only, does she?

Yep, I’m a dead man.

SHOGI RETREAT

“Yaichi. Wake up

I open my eyes and see an anxious girl with long black hair staring back at me.

Where am I again?

Oh yeah! That’s right. A girl I met during the Elementary Meijin Tournament invited me to an overnight Shogi practice session retreat thing That’s why I’m here at a temple in Kyoto.

The girl who woke me up in the middle of the night is——.

“Ma-chan? Why are you up so late

“..... et

“Hm?”

“..... Would you come with me to the toilet? It’s dark I’m scared

“Huuuuh?! M-Me?!”

Well, all temples are really dark at night and who knows when ghosts will come out. I can understand why she wants someone to go with her.

But am I even allowed to go with her to the girl’s room?!

“Please Yaichi Any longer and I’ll, I’ll mngh

“O-Okay! I’ll go, I’ll go!”

Ma-chan is a nice girl and very good at Shogi, but a bit of a crybaby. She’s helpless without me around.

“I’ll go with you, so don’t cry. Okay? Ma-chan

Machi, fidgeting and about to cry, and I slip out of our futons and tiptoe toward the restrooms

It’s so dark in the hallway, I can barely see my hand in front of my face. I lead the way while doing my best to walk softly so the floorboards don’t creak.

Machi squeezes the back of my shirt with all her might and follows me.

The temple restrooms are old Japanese style. Machi and I take turns taking care of business. I feel antsy hearing her ngghhs and ahhs, like it's something I'm not supposed to hear. So I plug my ears and wait for her to finish I did hear a little bit, though

Then, once we get back my futon, "Yaichi. Please keep this a secret between us," she says as she climbs in because she's too scared to go back to her own futon.

..... Looks like I've got another secret to keep.

The only reason I was able to come along to the Shogi retreat is because Ginko is staying in the hospital for an exam and I was alone at Master's place.

"Gettin' invited to one o' Kayaoka-sensei's retreats don' happen every day! The Sage got that nickname fer seein' talent, and he's seen yers. Go show 'em what ya can do, and make him write that ya're gonna be the next Meijin someday."

Master couldn't have been happier for me as he pushed me out the door, but Keika wasn't so sure.

"But Yaichi, you shouldn't tell Ginko about this, okay?"

"Huh? Why not?"

"If Ginko found out that you went out on a fun practice session while she was stuck in the hospital What do you think would happen?"

"Eeeep"

So she can never find out about this overnight practice session.

Machi starts whispering from beneath my futon—.

"Yaichi? Have you already fallen asleep? I I wish to know more about you, Yaichi. Your favorite piece. Your favorite strategy. Your favorite professionals. Your favorite"

"Kuzuryu-sensei? Wake up. KUZURYU-SENSEI!"

—Ah!!

Waking up, there's Machi on the other side of a Shogi board reaching across to shake my shoulder.

She's completely different from the girl I saw just a second ago.

She's bigger, for one thing.

That's especially true for the boobs swaying to and fro in front of my face every time she shakes my shoulder——.

“S-S-S-Sorry!! I wasn't looking, I wasn't sleeping, I wasn't looking, I wasn't sleeping!!”

“I never told you not to sleep. So long as it doesn't interfere with progress.”

That's impossible.

“Also, if looking at my breasts increases your productivity even the slightest degree, please let me know. Would you prefer the left? The right? Or, both at once?”

“Th- That's a funny joke. Ha-ha-ha”

I'm wide awake now. Okay, back to work!

Doing a cramming session in the same room with Machi has helped me progress by leaps and bounds.

My skilled editor goes over a manuscript that I wrote myself and immediately says, “It may be best to start labeling these unique perceptions you have in your head a specific name.”

Yeah, we're back to the grindstone.

“Give a name to perception? Could you be more specific?”

“For example, by assigning the word lolicon to those who only display interest in young girls, the image comes across loud and clear, yes? Just like that.”

“I completely agree, but don't at the same time”

She turned my matchlock musket analogy from before into operation. She dubbed the defensive formations as relativity and plasticity, piece value as versatility, Static Rook and Ranging Rook as dimorphism and more. Machi put her skills as a copywriter on display. I'd expect nothing less from the person

who came up with Naniwa's Snow White

She put labels on random sequences that just come to me one after another and made them sound like strategies that would work in the real world.

By putting a board between us and engaging me in conversation, Machi is slowly but surely squeezing all the ideas out of my head.

“Pro players like me can sense when pieces are lining up just right, but it's not perfect. Since we move pieces on mental Shogi boards to confirm our own ideas, blind spots are bound to pop up every once in a while. That's where software comes in to bridge the gap.”

“So when a person feels that something isn't right, rather than decide the software has made a mistake, that is the portion they need to investigate further?”

“Yes. It's already a blind spot and the mid-game is full of sequences where players haven't read that far into them before. The chances that they'll consistently play the best possible move is extremely low. That's where I like to ramp up the pressure.”

“In terms of your match records, would this particular Shogi be a good example of what you're talking about?”

“Yeah! I went with this sequence here because of that idea——.”

Machi doesn't figuratively have all my matches memorized, they are literally all in her head.

Just the league matches themselves would be one thing, but she remembers the variants that showed up during the review sessions and even the sequences that I'd forgotten all about, even though I suggested them back then.

——She is a Shogi journalist, after all.

I lived in the same apartment with Ai Hinatsuru. But there's a place where even my apprentice wasn't allowed to enter.

The arena during a league match.

The one I've spent the most time with in there isn't Ai or Big Sis or even an opponent. It's the journalist who always sat at the board side table——Machi

Kugui.

I'm not saying that I didn't try my best while working with Ai or doing practice sessions with Big Sis. There's just a level of intensity that only comes with playing a league match. That killer instinct doesn't come out anywhere else.

One real match outdoes 1,000 practice matches.

I'm sure that applies to all kinds of competitions the world over, not just Shogi.

If that match happens to be a title match, the intensity is on a whole other level.

Title holders show another level of competitiveness in that sealed-off room that no one else gets to see, especially the Meijin. Think of it like ultimate combos in a fighting game.

Ten thousand practice matches won't get you anywhere close to that stratosphere.

Machi was in the room for nearly all my title matches as either a journalist or the match recorder. That includes my matches against *Okito-sensei*, a player who trained himself to think like software.

—She already had the groundwork place for understanding my point of view.

Additionally, Machi proved that she could play with surprising accuracy in the unpredictable mid-game during our practice session at Nanzenji.

“Um Machi? May I ask you a question?”

“What is it? Is there an issue with the formation I selected?”

“Ah, no! This isn't about Shogi——.”

I wonder if she'll get angry at me for bringing this up while we're working?

But it's bugging me and I really want an answer.

“I used to call you Ma-chan way back when, didn't I? And you called me Yaichi, too.”

“.....”

“You showed up as a little girl in the dream I just had. So, it made me curious. When did we start calling each other by different names?”

Ma-chan the crybaby from back then and the completely in-control Machi of today.

There’s such a clear line between them, I’ve never been able to figure out what it is.

“..... Surely you recall when, after the Elementary Meijin Tournament, O-Ryou and I visited your Kansai Shogi Association building over the summer, yes?”

Machi starts speaking as she moves pieces across the board.

“Yeah I remember that. I think I went home in the middle of it, too. Why, though? I think Big Sis came in and said something

“Ginko challenged both O-Ryou and I to a match that day, both of us simultaneously.”

..... Come again?

“Her condition, should she be victorious, was that we never return to the Kansai Association. O-Ryou accepted, but I asked for a different condition instead, because I was on the cusp of entering the Practice League.”

The old 9 One Yagura style appears on the board in front of me.

At the time, *she* used that sequence more than anyone.

“Once Ginko claimed victory, this is what she said.”

Then, after lining up the pieces in a match record in which the defender had an overwhelming lead only to lose on the very last possible move to an instant death, Machi answers my question.

“Never call *him* Yaichi again.”

Machi looks like she could break down in tears at any moment.

That’s exactly like the girl I used to know——.

“You had to keep that promise? Gin- Big Sis made you?”

“Ever since that day, I have never once prevailed against Ginko Sora.”

The girl, looking somberly at the final formation....., makes eye contact with

me at last and smiles.

“However, I feel as though I can defeat her now. Surely, I have Kuzuryu’s Notebook to thank for that, no?”

AMANOHASHIDATE SHRINE

“All I see is a long, muddy trail

Actually, walking along the Amanohashidate land bridge is surprisingly boring. I was over it after five minutes.

“How can it look so mystical from above but feel like a long slog through pine trees when you’re actually in it? Talk about a letdown

“Oh? This is quite enjoyable for me!”

Since we’re already at a tourist spot, my pleading with her for at least an hour of sightseeing finally got through to Machi. She, reluctantly, has brought me outside to take a look around.

But her mood does a 180 once we get here.

She’s been almost giddy since our first stop, a temple called Chion-in. We drew fortunes on paper folded like a fan, which is extremely unusual—after which we hung them on a pine tree. They also have incense smoke that is said to make you smarter—she told me to breathe extra deep. Is it because I’m an idiot? Then her camera shutter went off nonstop at Kaisen Bridge. Apparently the bridge that connects to Amanohashidate has an unusual architecture—it rotates to let boats pass through. We stopped at a small tea shop along the way for lunch and indulged in their famous Asari-don—an amazingly good rice bowl with clams.

And now she’s shoving her camera into my hands as she goes up to a stone monument (?) we found along the side of the path.

“Ryuo-san! Here! Take a photograph of me next to it!”

“What exactly is it? It looks like two stone monuments to me

“A dedication to Tekkan Yosano and Akiko Yosano, engraved with *waka* poetry!”

Whatever it is, she’s really excited about it

With her picture in front of the monument successfully taken, Machi’s eyes

light up when she finds a rock on the ground. “My, myyy!! C-Could this be Jutaro Iwami’s sword testing stone?!”

I-I have no idea I guess she’s a history buff?

She has a lot in common with her younger sister apprentice, Ayano I think to myself when Machi, quite a bit in front of me, says why she is so excited to be here.

“In truth, I am considering writing my graduation thesis on Tekkan Yosano. There is no doubt that he once visited the green wilderness of Amanohashidate!”

“Graduation thesis? Wouldn’t it be easier to write a Shogi article?”

“That is work. As I have taken the time to attend university, I feel that I should become familiar with a wide array of topics before taking my place as an adult in society.”

That’s some serious drive right there.

“Didn’t Akiko Yosono write oh, what was it? Thou shall not pass?”

“Are you referring to Thou Shalt Not Die?”

Sorry, I never went to high school.

“That is one of her famous works, but I’m particularly fond of her maiden release. A collection of poetry known as Tangled Hair.”

“Ah! I’ve heard of that one. I’m not really sure what it’s about, but”

“Sex.”

“PWFFF!”

I trip over my own feet on the muddy path.

S-, s-s-s-sssss s-!

“The verses invoke images of the aftermath of a raucous sexual encounter, thus tangled hair. The rest of the collection is abundant with thinly veiled innuendo Te-he-he. Reading it for myself for the first time set my heart aflutter.≡”

Since she was about 20 years old when she wrote that over 100 years ago, she

was apparently relentlessly bashed by the public.

On top of that——.

“Akiko became involved in an extramarital relationship with the poet Tekkan Yosano, who lived in the Amanohashidate area, and the two eloped to marry. This drew immense criticism as well.”

“One of those stealing a married man weddings, huh?”

“In actuality, Akiko and Tekkan’s wife did not seem to be on bad terms.”

The more I listen to the story, the more it sounds like Tekkan was the problem.

Even after marrying her, he still drifted from one affair to another Why are scumbags like him so popular? I just don’t get it

“Despite the criticism, she supported her husband, raised many children and had a fruitful career as a poet. In my eyes, she is the ideal human being.”

“She walked her own path no matter what anyone else said. Yes, she sounds like an amazing person.”

Actually, doing that is extremely difficult.

All I have to do is play Shogi. Look at the board, that’s it. But other things in life always drawn my attention in the end.

Like constraints, I guess you could say.

I thought I’d finally broken free of them so that all I’d ever have to do in life would be to focus on Shogi But there are some things that my own strength alone just can’t do.

Machi says there’s a place further down the path she wants to go, so we are trudging down the neverending path of boredom once again.

“Ah! That is it!”

“What is it?”

It turns out to be a small shrine.

It looks like a shrine you could find anywhere, with the only difference being

its predictable name: Amanohashidate Shrine——.

“Wait? That’s strange Are there a bunch of rocks piled up on the *torii* gate?”

Machi explains it to me. “Legend states that placing a stone upon this *torii* gate grants a wish.”

“Well that explains why there are so many rocks!”

There are also rocks piled up on the fence that surrounds the shrine. I guess people who weren’t tall enough to get a stone on to the gate had to compromise.

Machi already has a stone in her hand to try her luck, but——.

“Ngh Haa! J-Just a little bit higher”

It’s not quite in her reach.

But this is one heck of a treat for the eyes.

Every time she jumps, her boobs bounce just a second behind, going up and down like afterimages Now this is one of the three great views of Japan (the other two being Keika and Ms. Rokuroba).

“Is something the matter? Sitting on the ground like that.”

“Sorry. I took an arrow to the knee”

The arrow actually hit a bit higher, but the fact remains that I can’t stand up right now.

“Hmmm?”

I keep my eyes on the ground as Machi walks up to me. Then, staring straight down, she says.

“I believe a piggyback ride would allow me to place the stone atop the gate.”

“P-!”

Piggyback ride?

“These shoulders right before my eyes seem to suffice.”

“.....”

Glancing up just a little I discover that Machi has thick thighs for being such a slender person overall.

And those are going on to my shoulders?!

Machi crouches down to my eye level and says with a grin, "Give me one. A piggyback ride."

"..... Okay."

Still sitting on the ground, I lean forward like a condemned prisoner waiting for the executioner's axe.

Then, around my neck—.

"One and two. Go ahead and stand."

The hot, soft pressure of her thighs closes in My neck and cheeks are enveloped. Holy Hoooooooooly!

She must've broken a sweat after all that running around earlier, right?

It seems a bit, well damp

"Nhhh!"

Stop moaning like that or you'll make me fall over! I'm barely standing as it is!!

"Yaichi, keep a firm hold of my legs."

"Y-Yes!"

"Eek! H-Hold firmer! Your constant swaying is giving me a heart attack!"

"H-Have you, put the stone, up there?"

"Aye."

I take one very slow step backward and bend my knees to let Machi down. I won't be getting back up for a while. My knees, they took way too much damage.

Everything from my ears down to my shoulders is hot.

"Is something the matter? Was I too heavy for you? You seem to be gasping for breath, your face is redder than an apple"

“N-No, it’s no that Just tired after so much exercise! Ha-ha-ha”

“Ah! In that case——.”

With that Machi scurries over to the edge of the shrine property.

There’s a small well over there.

“We have gone in the reverse order of the customary practice, but before praying at the shrine, we are to purify ourselves with *isoshimizu* spring water.”

“Iso shimizu?”

“It is the miraculous spring that Shikibu Izumi sang of in one of her poems. As it emerges from the ground without the slightest bit of salt despite being surrounded by the sea, it has been revered since ancient times.”

“That is pretty special, isn’t it? How could there be freshwater beneath a sandy path that goes over the ocean?”

I’d love to look it up online, but my phone and wallet are still confiscated by my skilled editor, so I can’t.

“That has led to many legends pertaining to *isoshimizu*. One of them claims that bathing in it can return one to their true form.”

“True form?”

“Would you like to?”

“Huh?”

Machi puts her hands beneath the flowing waterspout and starts washing them. Slowly, thoroughly

Watching those water droplets twinkle in the sunlight, filtering them through the trees has me in a trance——.

“There. Now it’s your turn, *Yaichi*.”

“.....!! O-Okay”

Since I’m still stuck sitting on the ground, Machi procures the *isoshimizu* water with both hands, carries it over and——splashes me!

“Haaa!”

“Gah?! Wh-Why the face?! It’s freezing! Cut it out!!”

“But so much is clinging to you, is it not, Yaichi? You are in need of purification.”

“What’s clinging to me?!”

“So many bad old flames. And evil spirits, I suppose.”

Now that I’m soaked with miraculous spring water, Machi looks at me with expectation.

“..... Say it. What is my name?”

“Machi Kugu- Machi.”

“Chan.”

“M-Ma- chan

“Yes!”

There she is: Ma- Ma-chan smiling at me like an innocent little girl.

Then, in a tiny voice, “..... I have finally reclaimed

“Reclaimed? What? From who?”

“That’s private.”

Why? All we’re doing is own each other’s names like we used to So why does it feel like we’re doing something wrong? But I can’t press any further.

Finally getting to my feet, I try to distract myself from this guilty feeling and change the subject.

“S-So, Ma-chan, what did you wish for? Let me guess: to become the Challenger for the Women’s Legends Title?”

“Bzzzzt. Incorrect.”

“Then, claiming the Woman’s Legend Title to become a dual title holder?”

“A hint. It has to do with you, Yaichi.”

“Me?”

I stop to think for a moment.

It comes to me in an instant. It's simple.

"Ahh I see now. That's why we're here at Amanohashidate in the first place."

Machi's No, Ma-chan's wish.

What else could it be?!

"You wished for my debut to be a hit, didn't you?! Right, right?!"

"..... That's private. He-he-he. ≡"

"Hey! C'mon, you can't do that!! I gave you a piggyback ride and everything, so tell me!"

"A-ha-ha-ha-ha! Follow me!≡"

Machi runs through the pine trees, laughing like a little girl and emerges onto the white sandy shore.

I can't help but laugh and chase after her. It feels like we're kids again.



“Yaichi. I cannot tell you my wish as of now, but” Machi turns around and says, just before reaching the waterline, “I will tell you the verse in Tangled Hair that strikes a particular chord with me.”

Placing her hands on her chest, Machi——starts singing.

“Mune no kiyomizu, afurete tsuhini, nigori-keri, kimi mo tsumi-noko, ware mo tsumi-noko.”

Machi’s voice resonates with the waves behind her, flowing past my ears with the breeze.

At first I thought it was a beautiful song.

But wait *nigori* means murky or dirty.And what about the *tsumi* part at the end? That means to sin, so

Combining those words with a pure, overflowing heart seems odd to me.

I wish I could look into it more but without my phone, I just can’t.

Click!

“.....?”

Machi’s camera is aimed right at my face. Teasingly, she says, “A commemorative photograph. The day Yaichi returned to his true form.”

We make our way to the end of Amanohashidate and find a small pier. Boarding the ferry, we ride back to where we started.

Both of us didn’t say anything while waiting for the boat, but Ma-chan’s purified hands wouldn’t let go of my clothes the whole time.

Just like on that Shogi retreat.

THE FINAL KEY

I look through the steam and spot a scowling, yet handsome man on the other side. Flashing my brightest grin, I say hello.

“Well, hello there. The owner had dibs on the first bath? I suppose ownership does have its perks!”

“Natagiri

“He-he≡ I came!”

How could anyone, including the Worldly Maestro, contain their surprise upon seeing one of their oldest compatriots from the Sub League stark naked from out of the blue?

Mitsuru Oishi, already shoulders deep into the bath, awkwardly looks away.

“..... I won’t tell you not to come, but your timing is horrible. We’re about to play each other in a placement match

“I usually do consider little details like that.”

No matter how close two players may be, we keep the pleasantries to a minimum before matches and suspend practice sessions.

Mitsuru here is especially competitive, so he takes that curtness further than most.

“But at the moment you know? There’s really only one match I have time to think about.”

I fill a bucket and rinse my body.

The water is just hot enough to prickle the skin, Mitsuru’s favorite. However, even that feels lukewarm to me right now.

“May I take a seat next to you?”

“You’re supposed to ask *before* sitting down

“You would’ve said no if I’d done that, right? You always have.”

The first time I paid a visit to the Gokigen Bathhouse was back when we were

both clashing in the 3-*dan* division.

Back in those days, I always spent the night in one of the Kansai Association's *tatami* rooms whenever I had to travel. The association issued a travel allowance, but I wanted to use the extra money for other daily necessities.

It just so happened that Mitsuru made me an offer.

"Want to crash at mine? I'll let ya relax in the tub."

In exchange for helping out around the bathhouse, I got a nice bath, some free food and even a practice session with his Ranging Rook if Mitsuru happened to be in the mood.

Those were happy times.

And the cold milk we drank together after coming out of the bath

That flavor was a shining beacon of a silver lining in my dark days of intense training.

So I'm particularly fond of bathhouses.

Traveling around to different ones and meeting all sorts of people has become a hobby of mine

This hot water and all the memories flooding in have sent me off in my own little world, but Mitsuru pulls me back.

"So you're at a full set, huh?"

"Yep, as full as can be I couldn't finish him off. I was on top the whole match, but couldn't follow through in the end for some reason and lost"

The Fourth Monarch Title Match.

It took place in Tokushima yesterday, and I held the advantage all the way to the late-game's doorstep.

"I lost before I knew what was happening."

Analyzing what happened in the review session and consulting my computer haven't helped me understand where I went wrong.

I even read a sequence where I came out victorious. It was right there.

But, for whatever reason, I couldn't make that move A computer will

never be able to understand why.

“During this series of title matches, I got to see a brand new side of him. Just when I thought I had seen the very deepest parts a whole new, deeper face comes to the surface.”

People pull out all the stops in competition.

I thought I had seen the fullest extent of them already.

“Just when the I’ve won feeling set in, I got blindsided from the opposite direction. All that confidence blown to smithereens. I don’t even know how I should fight in the final match anymore.”

“Hey, I took a title off him before, but he took it right back. He’s got a winning record against me overall. He’s getting stronger, too—not that I have a clue how.”

“Getting even stronger He-he. If only he’d cut us some slack.”

“No kidding. We’ve got monsters above and below. I’d love to catch a break”

We’ve dubbed our generation The Valley.

The Golden Generation led by the Meijin came before us, and this new generation with Yaichi Kuzuryu is chasing us from behind. We are stuck in the middle, the generation that drew the short straw. Our generation didn’t get to have time in the spotlight.

At this rate, we never will.

But

“Oh yeah, I heard from Mr. Kiyotaki the other day that you’re looking after Ai now.”

“Yep. My research room has had a Women’s player living in it for a while already. I figure there’s not much difference between having one or two, don’t you agree?”

“I was worried when she upped and said she was transferring to Kanto But hey, winding up with you does make the best of a bad situation.”

Bad situation? Mean, no?

“Tell her to drop me and Asuka a line every once in a while, would you? Ai is still a valued member of the Gokigen Bathhouse, after all

Which reminds me, Ai does play Gokigen Central Rook every so often.

I thought she had an incredible sense for it even though she normally plays Static Rook..... Getting lessons from the Worldly Maestro himself certainly explains it.

“So, tell me, how is Yaichi holding up? Is he down in the dumps without Ai around?”

“He’s MIA.”

“What?”

“No one’s been able to reach him for days now. Keika got worried and went to see him at his apartment, but it’s covered with yellow tape and there’s a big condemned sign out front. It looked like he’d moved out ages ago. So, yeah, he’s MIA. Asuka freaked out and stapled posters on telephone poles all around Fukushima Station

Looking for a lost kitten, is she?

“Perhaps Yaichi went looking for Miss Sora, hmm?”

“What if he did? Is that not manly enough for your liking?”

“I may have thought so before. He was born with such incredible talent, but all those distractions keeping him away from Shogi weren’t doing him any favors.”

“And that’s changed?”

“After seeing all of the improvement he’s made, I have to acknowledge that perhaps I’m the one who’s been making mistakes, no?”

I happened to be Yaichi’s first opponent on his professional debut.

On that day, I honestly thought he was pathetic.

My opinion of him changed when he got the Ryuo Title is what I thought. It turns out that wasn’t the case.

Others seeing him differently changed his public perception, but that’s all.

What really changed him, no, made him evolve was—.

“What makes Yaichi truly impressive is how he improves those around him, not just himself. He and that soon-to-be-promoted-to-A-division Ayumu Kannabe are at the forefront of this up-and-coming generation, and Miss Tsukiyomizaka and Miss Kugui are in the Women’s League doing the same thing. Not to mention Miss Sora and—.”

“The two Ais yeah?”

Yes. Those two apprentices of Yaichi had an immeasurable impact on him.

One look at the timing of the changes in his playing style found in his match records was enough to convince me.

...Which is exactly why I reached out to one of them.

The one who excels where I struggle—the late-game—Ai Hinatsuru has turned it into an art form.

A few online practice sessions were enough for me to see immediate results.

After all, I’ve made it to the Monarch Title Match and I’m clicking on all cylinders in my other league matches.

“Which reminds me, Mitsuru, weren’t you also MIA when you went to Kagoshima to participate in that Goma ritual? Was there any point to it?”

“I suppose, since I never want to think of working at a bathhouse as a chore. Heat doesn’t bother me much at all now.”

“I’m talking about your Shogi.”

“Playing is the only way to get stronger. C’mon, you know that.”

He gives me a look like that was the dumbest thing I’ve ever said. Well, this is embarrassing. He-he I’m rather fond of that sharp tongue.

“You challenged the Meijin three times only to come up empty. It was on your fourth that you finally claimed that title, yes?”

“Yeah Did you come here to ask for my two cents on how I got it from him?”

“Oh, no, no. I came to hear about the third one.”

“You what?”

Mitsuru went tit for tat against the Meijin during his third run at a title. He backed the Meijin into a corner, forcing a full set ... only to run out of steam at the very end.

I want to hear his impressions now that I’m in a full set myself.

Did he feel he’d found an answer, or——.

“What’s it like to lose after a full set?”

“..... How to put this

Mitsuru scoops up some hot water and washes his face.

Then he gave me this allegory.

“Think of a small house at the very top of the highest mountain.”

“Uh-hm.”

“You fall down over and over again trying to scale back up the cliff, but you manage to reach it despite all the setbacks.”

“Uh-hm.”

“But right when you turn the door knob you realize you forgot to bring the key.”

“Sounds painful.”

“Because it is painful.”

Despite reaching the very top, you’re forced to go back to the bottom with nothing to show for your efforts and start again from square one.

That’s far worse than simply starting off at the foot of the mountain, yes?

Interesting

"Losing that way cuts a lot deeper than being swept outright. And, it's like how losing to a sudden death at the last moment of a promising match hurts so much worse than being beaten up and down the board the entire time. I'll give it to you straight. The only way for things to be easier now that you're at a full set is to win."

“Painfully blunt aren’t you, Mitsuru? Just like you always have been. I don’t think you’ve ever encouraged me, not once”

“That’s Kansai style.”

I heard about that back when I was in the Sub League.

In Kansai, the more potential someone has, the harsher everyone is to them. Apparently, that kind of tough love spurs their talent.

“Gritty, stubborn Shogi ... and not meddling in others’ business. That’s Kansai style. I’ve always thought you’d fit in better here than with those pretty boys over in Kanto. That’s why——.”

“Why what?”

“Why I think someone else has your last key.”

I don’t have it but someone else does?

Is he telling me to fight for the sake of someone else?

As in: for the fans? Or my family maybe?

“The more anyone thinks they can fight for their own sake, the more strength they can muster when they’re playing for someone else. Still all I can do is tell you to try it out.”

“Well thank you, Mitsuru. Oh! Why don’t I wash your back to repay you?”

“Don’t bother.”

He-he! Look who’s shy. ≡

“But this is a pickle.”

“What is?”

“This last key you’re talking about I think I already have someone who fits that bill.”

REFLECTED IN YOUR EYES

My cramming session continues as usual after visiting Amanohashidate Shrine. With the exception of walking in on Ma-chan in the middle of changing after a bath, work progresses without any provocative happenings. I'm not disappointed or anything, yeah? After all, I'm grateful for this perfect writing environment, aren't I?!

The early and middle parts are nearly finished. All that's left is the late-game, uh, book.

"This is our final push. It would be fitting to feast upon crabs tonight for nourishment in preparation for the last spurt."

"Yay!"

When it comes to winter on the Sea of Japan, crabs are it.

Leaving the war zone that my writing studio has become for the first time in ages, Ma-chan and I head for the inn's cafeteria and order up a bunch of them. The air is filled with nothing but the echo of snapping crab legs

"Oh yeah. Speaking of crabs——."

"Speaking of? How do you mean?"

"Do you think software plays a perfect late-game, Ma-chan?"

"Huh? I'm at a loss as to how that relates to crabs."

Now that she points it out, I can see how other people wouldn't make the connection.

But for me, seeing crabs always reminds me of someone

Looking at the pile of empty shells in the middle of the table, I explain. "I don't really think so. Software is strong because it takes a different approach to Shogi than people do. It's just playing a style that people have a hard time playing. So I think it's far from perfect"

"You say that holes are abundant, yet hard to identify?"

"Yeah. There are some formations that software has a hard time analyzing,

and I think most of those are in the late-game and in Ranging Rook.”

“As software learned the game by playing Static Rook against itself, it’s understandable how it would have difficulty rating Ranging strategies,” says Ma-chan between slurps of crab soup before asking a question back. “But isn’t it particularly strong in the late-game? Are you saying it can’t read long checkmate sequences? Like your 7 Seven Rook Promote in the First Crown Title Match, for example——.”

“Not so much the sequence length Hmmm Saying it’s not good with those formations makes sense. It’s like the way people have blind spots. You know how you can miss a simple five step check path sometimes?”

“In a Shogi puzzle, that certainly happens. But in an actual match——?”

“Those formations didn’t show up.... *Until now.*”

I emphasize my words without realizing it.

“People play *in a way that makes it so those hard-to-see check paths don’t happen.* Think of the *anaguma*. If you make it so that being checkmated is impossible, it doesn’t matter if you can’t see check paths or not.”

“Ah yes. As I play it myself, that example does strike a chord with me.”

It’s also easy for people to understand formations that cannot be checkmated without a certain piece. Knight Z and Bishop Z are like that.

“Meanwhile, software’s biggest strength is its ability to calculate. So it doesn’t bother with strong defenses. Since its early-and mid-game are different from the way people play, it makes sense that the late-game is different too. Don’t you think?”

“Ah!”

“So when two software programs play against each other, sometimes there are check paths that people spot right away, but the software doesn’t register them for some reason. Specifically, it misses a lot of checkmates that require it to sacrifice a big piece for free. That kind of thing happens all the time in Shogi puzzles. Not that I know the reason why,” I say as I watch the crabmeat bubble in the soup.

The one who always seems to find those check paths

“What I’m trying to say is that people have put too much trust in software. As a result, they tend to overlook the same holes.”

“Trust you say?”

“Trends are born because everyone trusts them. Ride that trend and you win more matches. Go against it and you lose more.”

It goes without saying that the one who started the trend benefits the most from it.

“That used to be the Meijin. So it makes sense that pro standards became formations that were easy for the Meijin to read.”

“You claim that the all-rounder Meijin once held the same status that software does today? That was his secret for retaining so many titles?”

“Yes. He didn’t create any revolutionary early-game strategies, but he made improvements to pretty much all of them. So, rather than getting closer to Shogi’s arcanum —.”

“While increasing precision, the Meijin transformed the formations to ones he could easily use to his advantage Am I understanding you correctly?”

“That, and he had another tool for making his way of playing more mainstream. Something that separated him completely from other pros A tool that helped him reach more players than any advantage he had in Shogi skill.”

“Books.”

I snap a crab leg open and nod at Ma-chan’s short answer.

“Of course his strategy books sold well, but his books on competition and life skills also became bestsellers. In no time at all, the Shogi world began to emulate him both on and off the board. He even turned his daily life into a battlefield, so of course it would make it easier for him to win matches.”

Just to be clear, I don’t think the Meijin did this on purpose.

Making your research public puts you at a disadvantage in the short term, and writing a book takes much more time and energy than you think. So this is the only possible conclusion.

In this world, though, results are everything.

“We here in Kansai have always been apt to branch out and play more or less with brute strength in the early-game. Having that kind of freedom gave us enough leeway to absorb Shogi software strategies.”

That’s probably the reason I have a winning record overall against the Meijin.

It’s not so much age or talent as environment that’s making the biggest impact.

“And, most of all gritty, stubborn Kansai players couldn’t copy the Meijin’s streamlined lifestyle even if we wanted to!”

“Yaichi That’s how the world is reflected in your eyes.”

“Huh? The world?”

“Teach me more about how you see things, Yaichi.”

Ma-chan stares deep into my eyes.

She’s stared at me like this a lot ever since we were little. She’d look at my face even more than the board when we played Shogi, and there were plenty of times I’d look up and accidentally made direct eye contact with her I lost my nerve every time and looked away when that happened, though

“W-Well I think it will be a while before Shogi between people goes in that direction. Those kinds of holes won’t happen if your opponent can’t keep up with you in the first place.”

“From an editor’s perspective, however, I can see how the release of Kuzuryu’s Notebook would bring about such a world. It feels as though it could change the world from its very core.”

Ma-chan is always so levelheaded, but now it’s like she’s tripping over her own words. Maybe all this work is getting to her?

Her eyes are cloudy and her skin is moist as if she just got out of the bath. The sight is so provocative that my reflex is to look away.

“Releasing intellectual property allows monopolization of markets in the future. Just as corporations that take that approach grow rapidly, putting your innovative Shogi sense into a book will allow you to rise to the Meijin’s level in

no time No! As someone who claimed your first title at a younger age, you could very well surpass the Meijin to set records never before seen! Oh, how I would love to see that To see you claim all seven titles at a younger age than when the Meijin accomplished that feat.”

“..... I’d have no complaints.”

“So that may come to pass.”

Ma-chan grins as she puts her hands on her cheeks.

“I won’t be letting you sleep tonight. I’ll be doing everything I can to help our precious, precious baby come to life even a day earlier.≡”

One of the inn’s staff members arrives at our table carrying desserts. I see the slightest Go get ’em, tiger≡ look in her eyes as she holds back a smile. For some reason she slips me an energy drink under the table, too.

She’s got the wrong idea. I just know it

HOWL

The hand of the man up on the screen tremble harder every minute.

“The Meijin No, the Monarch’s hand is quivering!! Does that mean he’s won?!”

The Fifth Monarch Title Match.

This series is at a full set. The final match is being held in the special arena in Tokyo’s Shogi Association Building. I’m in the Analysis Room, called the Katsura no Ma, watching the match with Rokuroba-sensei.

The Katsura no Ma is on the fourth floor, the same as the special arena. This means that a title match is happening just down the hall.

With all that tension in the air——.

“S-So? Ms. Hintasuru? H-Have you adjusted to life in Tokyo?”

The Women’s League player talking with me is Tsubasa Gakumeki-sensei.

I fought against her to qualify for the Women’s Legend League. She’s a really strong sensei, and she was nice enough to come up and talk to me when we saw each other again for the first time after that.

It’s just so nice to talk with someone that I’m not paying much attention to the match.

“The Player’s Room in Kansai isn’t on the same floor as the arenas, so it feels strange to be analyzing it so close to the players. Um Can they hear us?”

“Oh, I see Yes, if we speak loud enough, they might hear but they’re concentrating so hard, it shouldn’t affect the match I don’t think”

“Thank you, Gakumeki-sensei! Oh, and please call me Ai if you’d like!”

“Heh. He-he-he Th-Then, please call me Ts-Ts-Tsu Tsubasa. We joined the Women’s League around the same time A-And, I’m only Women’s 1-kyu, and you A-A-Ai outrank me”

“I will! Thank you for being my friend, Tsubasa!”

“A-Ai We’re friends Heh! He-he-he≡”

Tsubasa used to be 2-*kyu* in the Sub League.

She’s taken tons and tons of match records, so she’s done an analysis with a whole bunch of pro senseis even though Women’s League players don’t normally come into the Katsura no Ma.

I have to work hard to become a regular in this room like Tsubasa!

“Well? Does Jin-Jin have a shot?”

Rokuroba-*sensei* isn’t looking at the analysis board at all. Instead, she has her eyes on the screen and all the journalists are huddled over their laptop computers.

Both players are already out of waiting time and playing one-minute Shogi.

The Meijin won the first move with the piece flip and built a *yagura* that’s very popular these days, and Natagiri-*sensei* chose to do an aggressive rapid attack.

Even though he’s at a disadvantage on defense, Natagiri-*sensei* has used everything he discovered in those late-night research sessions to stay even with the Meijin all the way to the late-game.

Now——.

“The defender is opening a lead, bit by bit! Natagiri’s strong!!”

The software’s rating updates, showing the defender is starting to take command.

“But how?! The Meijin’s hand has been trembling the whole time Doesn’t that mean he’s read to the end?!”

“Maybe the formations are too complex for even the Meijin to understand?”

Everyone is so uneasy that they’re calling the Monarch the Meijin instead.

Rokuroba-*sensei* puts her hand on my shoulder and whispers in my ear, “All that late-game practice is paying off. Jin-Jin might win this because of you.”

“.....”

..... But, it’s?

Here, then here, here, here, here, here, here

“I-It’s official! The defender is in a position to win!! As long as Natagiri 8-*dan* doesn’t make any mistakes the title is his!!”

Rokuroba-*sensei* squeezes my shoulder.

“Yay! H-He’s going to have his first title!!”

“No.”

I take a look at the computer screen next to me and reach a different conclusion right away.

“The rating is wrong. I think the computer is missing the check path for the defending King.”

“B-But the computer says that Jin-Jin is going to win! Besides, where the heck do you see a check path, huh?!”

I reach for the analysis board.

“If the Dragon attacks the defenses here, a check path opens up.”

“..... Agh?!”

It’s a flashy move that everyone notices once I point it out.

But I don’t think they saw it because the software is saying he can’t be checkmated. This kind of thing happened a lot in the Kansai Player’s Room, too.

“It’s overlooking the check path. That happens sometimes.”

I puff out my chest a bit.

It’s nice to show them what I can do because I haven’t had a chance to speak with many people at all since I came to Tokyo.

But.

I thought they were going to be impressed, instead they’re looking at me like I’m a monster——.

“..... A check path that software didn’t recognize... spotted by a grade school girl? Th-That can’t be right”

“I-It’s true It’s just as she says. Software can’t read too deep so fast It

overlooks long-sequence check paths sometimes

“But how many professional players are in here? Not a single one of them read it. B-But she——.”

The one who has the strongest reaction is the person in front of me: Tsubasa.

“Unngh!!”

She covers her mouth with both hands and tumbles her way to the corner of the room before almost throwing up.

“T-Tsubasa?! Are you alright?!”

“I I’m okay He-he-heY-You’re really good, Ai Despairingly so”

She has turned pale as a ghost. Rokuroba-*sensei* sighs and rubs Tsubasa’s back.

“You’ve traumatized Undying Wings No wonder Naniwa’s Snow White lost heart. I’m amazed that the Demon King lasted so long with that kind of barbaric talent close by.....”

“Barbaric? All I did was solve a Shogi puzzle.”

“Simple-minded, too.”

She practically curses at me. Only then did I realize what I had done.

“Ahh!!”

I pointed out how the person who took me in is going to lose, and I bragged about it

Immediately after that.

The Meijin’s trembling hand picks up the Dragon and does what I said.

That hand doesn’t just tremble, it shakes. He nearly drops the piece before playing it.

“WHHOOOOOOAAAAAAAAA?!”

The computer ratings waiver until showing that the Monarch has all but won the match and the room erupts. The players had to have heard them

Looking at Natagiri-sensei on the screen, it's like watching his spirit die right before my eyes.

He sits up straight, fixes his kimono and pours himself a cup of water.

Once he takes a drink——.

"I lost."

He gives up without playing another move.

Then he asks the winner a question.

"Where did I go wrong? I don't understand. Why did I lose?"

The review session is different from the match in that both players look relaxed.

Rokuroba-sensei and I are sitting behind the media people in the arena. We were allowed to come in and observe, and I don't think I've ever seen such a peaceful review session before.

Natagiri-sensei and the Meijin have been research partners for a long time now. It's easy to tell how much respect they have for each other just by being in the room.

I think that kind of relationship is wonderful.

Thanks to that, Natagiri-sensei is smiling again even though he just lost his chance for a title. He looks optimistic and ready to move on as he tries to find out why he lost.

He was one step away from the title he'd always wanted But here he is, looking forward with his head held high. That strong heart is almost blinding.

"Natagiri-sensei is very strong I'm impressed."

"....."

Rokuroba-sensei doesn't say anything back to me.

Since the after-party schedule is tight, the review session only lasts 30 minutes. Both players go back to their rooms to change out of their kimonos.

The media people start talking once they're out of the room.

“It looks like Mitsuru Oishi and Yo Okito are the only ones from that generation who will ever have a title.”

“Oishi already lost his, and Okito is just the King now. Taishi Shinokubo already had a title, and he’s how many years younger than they are? If you look at ratings, Ayumu Kannabe has already overtaken the lot of them. This was probably the last chance they had.....”

“And don’t forget: a prodigy in Kansai will probably take all the titles for himself at some point—The Demon King of the West.”

“That generation just can’t catch a break. I feel sorry for those guys.”

..... They could have waited to have that conversation someplace else.

It reminds me of when Master lost three straight matches to the Meijin during the Ryuo Title Match.

All right! It’s up to me and Rokuroba-*sensei* to keep these kinds of comments from ever reaching Natagiri-*sensei* at the party!

“We’re going home.”

“Huh?”

Going home? Already?

Shouldn’t we——?

“Shouldn’t we go home with Natagiri-*sensei*?”

“Just come.”

Yank! Rokuroba-*sensei* tugs on my arm with strength I didn’t know she had and announces to the crowd in a bright and cheerful voice, “So-o-orry, but it’s the elementary school girl’s bedtime. We’ll be leaving now.”

“What? The college girl is going to miss out on the party?”

“The college girl has the Women’s Legend League finale to prepare for, so we’ll be on our way! ☆”

She dodges all their invitations beautifully and pulls me out of the association building at the same time.

..... Leaving Natagiri-*sensei* to fend for himself.

When we get home, Rokuroba-sensei starts taking off her clothes as soon we walk inside.

“Hurry up. We’re taking a bath and getting to bed.”

“Huh? We’re not going to wait for Natagiri-sensei to come back?”

For the first time, I’m starting to feel a little angry.

Natagiri-sensei looked fine during the review session, but I’m sure he’s hurting a lot right now. Are we going to ignore that just because of our own matches?

That’s heartless. Downright cruel!

If you want to sleep so badly, go ahead and I’ll wait up for him!

“When Master lost I cooked something warm for him to eat and drew a bath. He got angry at me for staying up so late, but I at least want to make something for Natagiri-sensei so he can come back to——.”

“Just stop.”

She’s at her wit’s end.

But she doesn’t look angry more like an appeal of some kind. The look on her face comes as such a surprise, I couldn’t say anything back.

In the end, we took a bath together. Rokuroba-sensei would compete very well with Keika

“Okay, off the bed. You’ll be sleeping over here tonight.”

Now in pajamas, she slides over to make space for me to lie down in her bed.

“Huh?! I-I can sleep in bed with you, Rokuroba-sensei?!”

What’s gotten into her?! We just bathed together I’m happy we’re bridging the gap, but doing it so quickly has me confused.

“I’m fine on the floor——.”

“Just get over here. I’m turning off the lights.”

She grabs my arm and pulls me into bed. Haauuu

Then the lights go out.

I was still tense from watching the title match, but I guess that a bath reset everything.

And it's been forever since I've been in an actual bed. It's so fluffy and cozy! The icing on the cake is how warm and soft Rokuroba-sensei's breasts are on my back I'll fall asleep in no time

Comfy, comfy Drift, drift

I did fall asleep right away, but one? maybe two hours later——.

RRRWWWAAAAAGGGGGGGHHHHH! RRRWWWAAAAAGGGGGGGHHHH!

I hear a beastly howl.

"?! Huh?"

Suddenly wide awake, I listen very carefully as I tremble under the covers.

RRRAAAUUUUGGGGGHHH! RRRWWWAAAGGGGGHHH!

It's a strange sound that I've never heard before in my life. I nearly fall out of bed trying to get away from it.

"Eeep! Wh-What's——?!"

"Shh! Stay quiet."

I start panicking but Rokuroba-sensei pulls me into a tight hug and whispers into my ear.

"Go back to sleep. Pretend that you aren't here Yes, that's right. It's okay"

"....."

At first I wondered what in the world could be howling like that.

After all, I've never heard a person make that sound.

But the more I listen to it, the more confused I get

Because there's something familiar about it.

"Huh Is that, Natagiri- sensei"

RRRWWWAAAAGGGHHH! AAAAUUUUUURRRRRGGGGHHHH!

I thought whatever is making the sound coming through the wall had completely lost its mind.

There was no way that kind, gentle, always-in-control Natagiri-sensei would ever make that sound

The roar starts trailing off into small, soft bursts. Then it comes back, stronger and more violent than before, only to be interrupted by soft sobbing It goes on for a long time.

Rokuroba-sensei loosens her arm and tells me, “..... Even after he commits that much effort, he still ends up losing against the top players more often than not. That Master of yours probably wins most of those, but even if he loses, they’re still a lot older than him, right? He can still comfort himself by saying he’ll win eventually.”

“.....”

“But Jin-Jin doesn’t have that kind of time left.”

She says the same kind of things that people in the Katsura no Ma said earlier today.

So I want to stand up for him.

Natagiri-sensei was one win away from a title!

He’ll win one, for sure! Even against the Meijin next time ...!!

But once I heard what Rokuroba-sensei said next I couldn’t bring myself to say anything.

“It’s gotten a lot worse since he lost to that Master of yours. It probably made him realize that the torch had been passed from his generation to the next.”

“.....!”

“The older generation was just too strong. He toiled against them without winning any titles and then suddenly—poof—someone from the next generation down claimed one..... Worse, a 16-year-old took a title and became a dual title-holding monster at the age of 18. Who knows how many titles he’ll have at this time next year?”

I had always wanted Master to win more than anything.

And he always came through for me in the end. He taught me that there is no wall enough effort can't break through.

So

I never thought of him *as being a wall for someone else* not once

"He wants a title. Just once is enough He wants that undeniable proof that he never lost to anyone at some point. If only he had that"

"What would happen?"

"He could forgive himself just a little, and that would make his life so much easier"

I think if I heard that while I was still living in Osaka, I wouldn't have understood.

Because playing Shogi for a living was so much fun. There was nothing painful about it at all. Sure, losing made me sad and I cried a few times. But I never thought about making life easier, and I thought the more difficult things were, the more fired up players were to play.

But now I think I understand.

The pain that comes with not being number one.

The pressure that clamps down your heart.

When you know that pressure will never, ever go away, it makes you rush and feel despair.

Once I found out, I I left Master's side and came to Tokyo.

"..... I really want to help him get it."

Rokuroba-sensei's voice trembles just a little bit. She might be crying, too But she's already rolled over with her face to the wall, so I don't know for sure.

"Remember before?"

"Huh?"

"You asked me why I stayed in this room so long, didn't you?"

“..... Yes.”

“It’s because I heard this howl.”

This howl?

It’s starting to fade away now, with just a few sobs coming through the wall every now and then. She tells me why.

“Lots of people, guys and girls alike, have seen him sleep or seen him completely naked. But I’m the only one who’s heard him make that howl. So yeah

“..... Um?”

“What?”

“I’ve heard it now, too

“You really are simple-minded.”

Then Rokuroba-*sensei* tells me how she met Natagiri-*sensei* and Shogi.

THE STORY OF TAMAYO ROKUROBA

“It was summer, when I was in the fourth grade. A professional Shogi player visited my school.”

Rokuroba-*sensei* starts telling me how it all happened while looking up at the dark ceiling.

“He had this suave air about him and a face to die for. All the girls squealed when he walked in. I wanted this man from Tokyo to remember me, no matter what. So I started practicing Shogi day and night. That’s how I got into it in the first place.”

“Was that Natagiri-*sensei*?”

“..... He was part of the association’s Shogi outreach program.”

She goes on without saying his name.

“They were working with a magazine to write an article with a full-color spread. The editor at the time must’ve taken a liking to me because they started a whole new regular series of articles documenting an elementary school girl taking lessons from a professional.”

Rokuroba-*sensei* got one lesson a month from Natagiri-*sensei* and made tons of improvements every time.

She started without knowing how the pieces moved, but became an amateur 1-*dan* in four months.

After only six months she passed the Practice League Entrance Exam.

The series lasted for one year, and she lost contact with Natagiri-*sensei* for a while after that. But she still kept playing——.

“I was the Women’s Amateur Meijin my first year in junior high, which instantly qualified me for the Women’s League. Everyone was calling me the Shogi Wonder Girl: Tamayon.”

It only took her one year to get into the Women’s Legend League and get Women’s 1-*dan*.

A lot of the things in Rokuroba-sensei's story, including how she started learning how to play later than most professionals, sounds a lot like my own experiences.

That also includes jumping headfirst into Shogi out of admiration for someone. We have so much in common.

"But that's as high as my star got," she says with a grimace and continues. "Even in the Women's League, title holders were a cut above the rest. I couldn't win against the older generation, not with Shakando-sensei and Big Sister Azami there. I also had to deal with Ryou and Machi in my own age group Just below me where the real monsters like Ika and Naniwa's Snow White."

It makes me nervous just hearing about that.

Now that Ten-chan is there too, the wall for a title is taller and thicker than ever.

I want to get stronger, so much so that my whole body heats up just thinking about it.....

"But, back then, I thought things would work out alright if I could just get over the disadvantage of living in the countryside. So I did everything I could to go to a Shogi classroom in Shinjuku. The Kanto Association has a rule about doing practice sessions in the building, so that's where all the pros practiced. I'd stroll in and beg the first one I saw to teach me and go from there."

"You went from Numazu all the way to Shinjuku?!"

"It's two-and-a-half hours one way, but that's still doable. Software wasn't all that strong back when I was in junior high and high school, so having practice sessions was the only way to improve back then."

Her nickname Practice Session Crusher apparently came from those days.

A very strong amateur player was in one of the groups that she approached. Not long after, he got married and moved someplace else. The group had to disband.

"For whatever reason, people started saying that Rokuroba broke up the group and that rep stuck. Still, I thought that developing a thick skin was just part of getting stronger... not that putting up with rumors has anything to do

with Shogi.”

“.....”

“But there really are lots of things you have to put up with outside of Shogi. Like for example, when I got invited to practice sessions by professional players and Sub League members, the classroom would always ask me how late can you stay and stuff like that.”

“I think I can relate. Whenever I went to the Kansai Player’s Room in the morning, professional senseis would say things like that to me, too.”

“It’s a man’s world, that’s why. At some point I started seeing myself as one of the guys..... One time I cut my hair really short after losing a league match and walked in saying I’m fired up now! That got a huge laugh. Even stronger players started inviting me after that. Just getting their invitation made me feel like I was making progress.”

“Your hair

The starting point was different, but the more she says the more I realize that Rokuroba-sensei and I have walked the same path.

And that it’s the same path a lot of other Women’s League players have walked.

“Laugh about it now, but back then I talked all rough and tough like the boys did. Ha-ha!”

She says that people stopped treating her like a girl and she started thinking of herself as a boy

Until one very bad night.

“It was winter of my second year in high school,” Rokuroba-sensei says in a dark tone. “I had nothing to show for being in the Women’s League for five years, and all of my classmates were starting to get serious about university entrance exams The pressure was real. So I thought that one extra match at practice sessions in Tokyo could be what I needed to get over the hump”

There were days when she had to sprint to make the last train. Even so, her record didn’t get any better.

So she thought she had to keep practicing even longer and missed her train

“The others were worried about me, but I just shrugged them off saying, I’ll crash on my friend’s couch for the night if I don’t make it! and left. The train was already gone. The night bus was completely booked too. I had no idea how different Shinjuku was at night either I thought I’d just spend the night at a manga café and catch the first train out in the morning.”

Since lots of Sub League members and strong amateur players had said that that’s what they did all the time, Rokuroba-*sensei* thought she could do it too.

But she was wrong.

...Because she was a cute high school girl who drew attention everywhere she went.....

“Manga cafes are pretty dim and there are tons of blind angles, much too dangerous for a high school girl to be there alone past midnight. I know that now, but I couldn’t sense the danger back then. And *I was touched.*”

“.....!!”

Those words hurt like a slap in the face.

I had wondered why Rokuroba-*sensei* was so insistent on staying where the people are the other day.

It was because she had lived through what happens when you didn’t

She wasn’t trying to be mean. She was trying to keep me from going through one of the worst nights of her life. Even now... she’s opening up like this even though it can’t be easy to talk about it.

And I I!

“It was the worst. There I was, short hair, talking like a guy But I had the fact that I was a woman shoved in my face. Appearance can’t change that That stung so bad, I just couldn’t deal”

“W-Were were you okay? I mean after he?”

“I smacked the bastard and dragged him to the police.”

Whoa

“But things only got worse from there. I had to explain what a high school girl from Numazu was doing in Shinjuku at night in the first place to the police Do you think they’d take Shogi as an answer? Huh? A high school girl playing Shogi? They thought I was part of some kind of paid-dating scheme to make some extra cash and didn’t believe me. I’m the victim, but they wouldn’t listen”

She says she had to call an adult to take her side, but her parents might make her quit Shogi altogether if they found out what had happened. And her Master was very conscious of public image and would kick her out of the Shogi family if the police got involved

“The one who came to my rescue that night was Jin-Jin.”

The contact information had been in her phone, but she hadn’t used it in almost six years.

—The name Jin Natagiri.

Rokuroba-sensei knew it was a long shot, but she pressed the button. Her voice shook as she told him what had happened.

Natagiri-sensei came right away.

He didn’t get angry at her or offer any strange praise. He just kindly stayed with her until morning.

“Jin-Jin had grown up way outside the big city, remember? That’s why he understood things without me having to explain He filled out the report for the police, took me to a 24-hour diner and did a Shogi practice session with me until the first train”

Rokuroba-sensei says that was the first time she cried, that night, and the tears wouldn’t stop once they got going.

Part of it was relief.

But she thinks it had more to do with knowing she didn’t have to try to be a guy anymore.

Talking with Natagiri-sensei that night is what helped her be honest with herself

“..... It had been forever since I’d seen the man I used to idolize. I found out during our reunion that not only was he still single, but also he had just become a title challenger. The media was going nuts over him, saying he was the Dapper David going against Goliath and the like. He was in all the magazines and on TV all the time Yet he still rode to my rescue like Prince Charming, told me I’d gotten stronger as we played Shogi and did it all with a smile As a high school girl from Numazu, he checked all my boxes. It was destiny, I just knew it.”

“.....”

“Hah! Yeah, yeah! Sappy, I know, right? Go ahead, say whatever you want Haa, this is embarrassing.”

“..... Rokuroba-sensei.”

“Hm?”

“I know what you mean!! I can relate SOOOOOOOO so much!!”

“Whoa?! O-Oh”

There’s so much I want to say! There’s too much I want to say!!

But I grit my teeth and bear it because we both have matches tomorrow. Nghhhh!

Her parents said, “Quit Shogi at once!” once they found out about the danger their daughter was in (I understand this all too well!), but Natagiri-sensei came in to lend a helping hand in her moment of need—,

“He started working with me whenever I came to Tokyo for league matches and he would stop by Numazu on his way back from Kansai, too.”

All of those practice sessions made Rokuroba-sensei’s feelings for him grow that much faster.

Natagiri-sensei’s sincerity won over her parents, and they became his fans. And it seemed like even though there’s a little age gap, if a nice man like him wanted to marry our daughter at one point!

There’s sooo much in common!!

“So I wanted to reduce the distance any way I could. I was chatting with

him one day and tested the waters with one of those oh, I'm thinking about trying to get into W-University. It's so close to your apartment here in Tokyo (glance) lines. Guess what! He said I should stay in his room until I got settled! I was all like Huh?! D-Does that mean?! and then——."

"You both had feelings for each other"

"Right?! That has to be it, right?! What else could it be?!"

She hit the books with those high expectations and passed W-University's exam with flying colors.

From there she moved into his research room and the two began living as next-door neighbors.

"..... But at the end of the day, all he ever saw me as was the student he used to teach when I was in elementary school, " she says somberly. He treats her like a child no matter how old she gets.

..... I know that feeling.

"We were never together or even official research partners for that matter. I got into my university's Shogi club and studied like mad, but all Jin-Jin was ever interested in were the talented young boys rising through the ranks. Like that Master of yours or Sir Ayumu."

"....."

I-It's true that Natagiri-sensei's way of speaking is a bit enthusiastic. Even I wasn't sure how to react at first

"So, yeah, I'd promised to find my own place once I was settled in, but I hung around here mostly out of spite."

"That sounds simplistic."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! You're one to talk!"

Rokuroba-sensei kicks off the futon.

"Besides, I'm a university student and I live in my own room! You and Kuzuryu-sensei were in the SAME APARTMENT!! There has to be a law against that! He passed it off as for training or whatever, but that was full-blown lolicon right there! I was sure he'd end up behind bars when I heard the news—and

kept my distance!!”

Really?

Sure, I might’ve come on a little strong at first, but I got both Master’s and my parents’ permission before moving in, so I highly doubt any laws were broken.

“Anyway We started having chances to work together and visited many places around the country. My bank account grew and I made lots of connections, but What I really wanted always seemed to get further and further away.”

“You love Natagiri-*sensei*, but Natagiri-*sensei* is too caught up in Shogi to notice, so you’re trying to use Shogi to get his attention, right?”

“Hold it right there! Those are two very different——.”

“Haaa You can’t tell yourself the truth even after all you’ve said to me? That reaction proves it.”

“Ngh! You’re in grade school, Shorty! What makes you think you can lecture me on relationships?!”

“Grade schoolers are very knowledgeable these days.”

I’m just going off what my old classmate, the relationship Master Mihane, told me. But she’s been right on the money.

“Well? What kind of relationship do you want with Natagiri-*sensei*?”

“..... Since he’s in love with Shogi, I’m fine with how things are now——.”

“That won’t do.”

“Huuuh? When did you get up on that high horse?”

“Have you ever directly told him how you feel, Rokuroba-*sensei*?”

“Running your mouth, aren’t you?”

“Have you?”

“..... Yes, if you must know.”

“When?”

“..... My last year of high school, in winter.”

“That’s ten years ago, isn’t it?”

“Wanna die, Shorty?!”

J-Just joking So, five years ago? Maybe?

“My Master was working on the Rules Committee at the time, and Jin-Jin was selected to serve as an assistant observer. I got called in to do commentary and help with the big board Jin-Jin almost never drinks alcohol, but he did at the after-party that night and looked like he was having a great time. The title match was happening at an inn out in the boonies, but the stars in the sky I’ve never seen so many in my life. The mood just felt right, you know?”

“A starry sky?! Where were you?!”

“Nagano”

“Nagano Prefecture!”

“Umm Why does that matter?”

Just picturing that night is so exciting! Rokuroba-sensei acts annoyed by my giddy squeals, but she tells me what happened next.

“Anyway so yeah That night at the party I waited until the two of us were alone, I looked into his eyes and said: Sensei, I love you”

“And?! And?! What did he say?!”

“Jin-Jin looked deep into my eyes and answered——....”

This is going to be so romantic, isn’t it? Oh! But what if this leads to things that my young ears shouldn’t hear?! But, but, people tend to go further than they would in the beautiful wilderness Nagano, so that’s possible, isn’t it?!

My heart is racing, but Rokuroba-sensei exhales out of her nose and smirks, “Do you happen to have a brother, Tamayon?”

“.....”

Ooph

“D-Do you?”

“Heck no!! I’m an only child, okay?!!”

WHAM!! Rokuroba-sensei slams her fist into the wall that separates our room

from the one next door. Looking closer, there seems to be a dent in the wall right there

“When push comes to shove, that guy Jin-Jin loves talent more anything else. Shogi is all he sees. I was never on his radar to begin with. Not that you’d understand that.”

“I do understand.”

“Huh?”

I understand too well. I understand how that feels so much that it hurts.

Because... I also——.

“I understand how it feels when the one you want to look at you is always looking at someone else no matter how talented you are or how strong you become I know how painful it is.”

“..... You just called yourself talented, Shorty.”

“That’s the only thing I believe anymore. Out of everything that Master said to me, that’s the only thing I think he was telling the truth about.”

I’m still not strong enough to believe in myself.

But I can believe that because *he* said it.

He said I can get even stronger.

“Heh Cheeky kid, aren’t you, Shorty? Yeah, I hate your guts,” Rokuroba-*sensei* says as she rolls over. That’s a signal that our conversation is over.

I’m glad I got to hear about how Rokuroba-*sensei* met Natagiri-*sensei* tonight.

After all, I got to find out.

Now I know why Rokuroba-*sensei* said she hated me.

And I know why her words resonate so much with me.

Now I can see a day when I reunite with him with my hair starting to grow back to what it used to be.

“..... Boring love stories we’re living, don’t you think?”

Rokuroba-*sensei* saying love made me very happy.

MANUSCRIPT COMPLETION

“..... There. The full manuscript is finished,” says Machi as she finishes skimming through the printed-out manuscript and brings an end to the cramming session I thought would never end.

“IT’S OOOOOOOOOOOOVERRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR!!” I yell as I fall backwards onto the *tatami* mat.

The room makes pigsties look neat and tidy.

There are enough empty energy drink cans and nutrient supplement bottles strewn around the room to bury someone alive.

“That was rough So much harder than any of my Shogi training”

That final push after eating all that crab was the climactic battle in an epic war.

One revision after another. Adding parts here, subtracting parts there, it was a never-ending cycle.

Mistakes always happened no matter how much I learned

“..... It’s funny, though. Now that it’s over, that really bad headache and all the pain in my shoulders and back are gone! Just disappeared! I’m not even tired anymore!”

“Wonderful to hear,” Ma-chan says with a grin. “After all, you still must compose the preface, the afterword, the five columns that will go between the chapters and your About the Author segment for the cover flap, Kuzuryu-*sensei*.”

“It’s not over yeeeeeeeet——!!”

My headache and back pain come back right away. ☆

“He-he. Please... have a long rest in the *onsen* hot spring tonight

With that, Ma-chan starts packing up.

She has a different battleground to prepare for.

“Feel free to complete those tasks by the time of my return. Two days should be more than enough, no?”

“.....!”

Hearing that, I sit straight up on my ankles with perfect posture and bow my head all the way down.

“Ma-chan, really I’m so sorry about taking up your time like this. You didn’t have any time to prepare for an extremely important match because I was so slow”

The final match of the Women’s Legend League is tomorrow in Tokyo.

But she was here helping me all the way up to the day before that all-important match.....

She was with me the entire time, so I know.

I know for a fact she didn’t have a single minute to work on her strategy.

Hey! I know that Ma-chan is good enough to win every match up to the finale on skill alone.

The reason she didn’t is because she was working with me to get this book done.

“Working with you all this time has shown me that more money, time and effort than I ever thought is required to survive in the publishing world. I know how much you sacrificed for this book, Ma-chan”

Even drawing up an outline isn’t easy.

Putting together a chart to demonstrate a formation is really hard, but she did it hundreds of times while checking each and every one of them for mistakes.

“The writing process is only one step in publishing a book You had so much more to do than I did! Even when you were telling me to take a break, you never slowed down, did you?”

I lost count of how many times she woke me up when I fell asleep at the computer.

She threatened me by saying that I wouldn’t get a wink of sleep until the manuscript was finished, but that was a lie.

Rather than wake me up the second I conked out, she let me snooze for as long as the schedule would allow.

Then she woke me up. But she didn't do it like a slave driver She motivated me, cheered me on with a gentle push.

In other words, she hasn't gotten anywhere near as much sleep as I have and must be so much more exhausted.

"Having to travel all the way to Tokyo for a match when you're really tired You're already at such a disadvantage"

"Not to worry," she answers with fire in her eyes and makes a promise. "I have a reason that will not allow me to lose. *As an editor.*"

An editor?

Not as a Shogi player?

"An editor's work is not complete once the manuscript has been finalized. There is a sequence that must be followed when publishing a book."

"Huh? What sequence?"

"Sales and marketing that connect a publication to customers' bookcases. Because it is not enough to simply to stock shelves in bookstores. Customers must have a desire to pick it up. Recently influencers on social media have had a large impact However the most effective method of advertising has remained unchanged for countless decades."

"? And that is"

"Proof of advantage on a Shogi board."

".....!"

"For the readers of said publication to use the strategies contained therein to achieve an overwhelmingly decisive victory. That is by far the best advertisement for a Shogi book. Always has been. Well, I am the editor of this particular one, but the duty falls on my shoulders," says Ma-chan jokingly as she places her hand on her chest. "I also happen to be the first reader of Kuzuryu's Notebook."

Her eyes are overflowing with confidence.

“My efforts could provide the impact necessary to change the world. My performance on the board is a vital part of sales and marketing. While being interviewed as a newly anointed *dual title holder*, I shall answer during the interview: Kuzuryu’s Notebook was the key to my improvement. What could sell more books than that?”

It’s true that Machi Kugui the Shogi player is the best person to test out the ideas in my book in an actual match.

That’s because Machi the Tormentor is known for building up an extremely sturdy fortress for her King using the *anaguma*.

If she changes up her style to the well-balanced type that software typically plays and starts winning even more than other Shogi pros who use that style, of course that’s going to attract a lot of attention.

Everyone will want to know how she did it.

—Especially in such a short amount of time.

Sitting across from the board, talking about all of this with Ma-chan as she grew right before my eyes was a lot of fun.

So much so that I could forget about everything other than Shogi.

It was like that Shogi retreat we went on when we were kids.

“I shall win the match tomorrow. That victory shall prove your theories in this book to be correct. Just——.”

Ma-chan looks at me apologetically as her voice trembles ever so slightly.

“The irony of it being against *her* is Oh!”

“!! M-Ma-chan!!”

Flump

Ma-chan starts getting to her feet when her knees give out and she falls on top of me headfirst.

Still sitting on my ankles, I reach out to catch her.

“Are you okay?! You didn’t hit anything, did you?!”

“..... Aye, my apologies A little dizzy is all May I stay here for a

moment?”

“Th- That’s fine by me”

I’m supporting her from underneath, so *They’re* pressing up against me.

Those two large, soft

“He-he. What a thank you this is I feel as though I’ve come out ahead,” Ma-chan says with a weak smile.

All those writing sessions and late nights really have taken a toll on her. I can see it in her eyes.

If I let go now, she’ll collapse right to the floor I embrace her petite frame and pick up where I left off earlier.

“Don’t worry about that. I want you to defeat her with everything you have.”

“..... Are you sure?”

“She went to Tokyo to become as strong as she possibly can. The shortest route to the top is to face strong opponents on the biggest stage. That doesn’t change, win or lose. And——.”

“And?”

I glance down at the newly completed manuscript and answer.

“The book needs a supervisor, right? Someone needs to check to see if what I’ve written actually connects them to a world they’ve never seen before There’s only one person who can provide that answer.”

RECORD 5

雛
鶴
あい

AI
HINATSURU

供
御
飯
万
智

MACHI
KUGUI

SERIOUS

“..... I got my period.”

It's the last day of the Women's Legend League.

And I, Tamayo Rokuroba, am the closest I've ever been to a title match in my life. But now I have to qualify for it in the worst condition possible.

“P-”

The elementary school girl stops making breakfast when I say this and just stands there.

Then, very carefully, she asks me, “D-Does it hurt?”

“Well you'll know for yourself soon enough”

I feel anemic. Standing up is enough to make me dizzy.

No appetite, my stomach kills. And my mind won't finish thoughts. I'm bloated everywhere. Sitting on my ankles is going to hurt so much Even my fingertips don't feel right

So, yeah, I'm in no shape to be playing Shogi.

“Awwh. I was starting to think this year would finally be the year, too”

Just when I thought I finally had enough luck to win in the end no matter what the world threw at me it bites back in the worst way possible.

Well, wait.

I was probably done for already after losing to those two lesser players after beating Ryou.

I wouldn't say I had dreams of grandeur But I was cocky, for sure. If I'd known this was going to happen, I'd have played to win the safe way rather than trying to strut around like that

“..... Um, Sensei? What about breakfast”

“Don't worry about it. I don't feel like eating anyway.”

I flop back into bed and pull the covers up over my head.

Somehow my hands and feet still feel like ice. Shivering

“I should just forfeit There’s no way I can play decent Shogi like this. It will be a humiliating defeat, everyone will start saying the pressure got to me, I’ll get annoyed, blah blah blah Besides, no one seriously wants me to challenge for the title anyway. They won’t even notice if I don’t show up at the arena, either! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha Haaa”

“.....”

The elementary school girl doesn’t say anything.

Totally silent she does the strangest thing.

She goes around the room, pulling food out of the refrigerator and off the shelves and lines it all up on the table.

“Didn’t you hear me? I said I didn’t want to eat——,” I say as I poke my head out from under the covers but swallow my words.

I mean, the stuff she’s lining up is”

“.....! Hey, that’s”

“Yes. Ingredients that you’ve gathered from all across the country, Rokuroba-*sensei*.”

The elementary school girl starts pointing at each of them and explaining what they are.

“This miso-seasoned fish was a gift from Ubaguchi-*sensei*. Kayunita-*sensei*’s husband gave you those *soumen* noodles. The rice, the meat, these vegetables, those fruits and drinks It’s not just food, either. Clothing, those bed covers, almost everything in this room is connected to someone in the Women’s League, right?”

“H-How did you know——?”

“Everyone knows. You secretly order things from their side businesses and give them free publicity on social media Everyone knows what you’re doing.”

It’s not like that.

Shogi fans like pinpointing things in pictures on social media.

That's why I thought it would be fun to put things I got from other Women's players in the frame. That's all there is to it.

I didn't have some master plan. I'm just entertaining myself on social media.

It's for the likes, that's all—.

"Do you remember the day when you came with me to the association, Rokuroba-sensei?"

"Ahh I did do that, didn't I?"

"Ubaguchi-sensei and Kayunita-sensei were there in the Women's Player's Room that day. Are you curious why they were there on a day when they didn't have matches?"

That's right.

I thought it was weird when I passed by them in front of the elevator. It didn't make any sense.

The elementary school girl tells me the reason.

"They saw me working with food that you ordered from them on your social media and wanted to thank me for it! They also apologized for the way that they were treating me, too!"

That happened?

"And then all of us talked about what an amazing person you are. How you help others post videos and find other ways besides Shogi to make money. Everyone knew They also know that you're donating so much of your hard-earned money to the Women's Shogi Association"

They do?

I was sure that they were trashing me behind my back.

But for it to have been the exact opposite is

"So many things are being said about Women's Shogi players, but you you shield them all as Tamayon People are mean to you all the time, but you can still accept what they say with a smile and navigate through it"

Just stop.

It's not like that. I'm no superwoman—.

"They said that since I've started living with you, then I must actually be a good person. I was so, so relieved to hear that But you had no idea, did you, Rokuroba-sensei?" says the elementary school girl as if she's cross-examining me on the witness stand.

"I moved to Tokyo but I didn't learn a single thing by myself I wouldn't have even made it to the board on my own"

I want to argue.

Say that she's wrong. Tell her that it's because she tried so hard.

But I can't.

There's a hot spot welling up in the back of my throat If I try to talk, it'll break

"So So!"

The elementary school girl continues her tirade because I can't say a word.

Just like the way she absolutely dismantled those software users with her late-game prowess, she's stomping all over my weak heart when it's down.

"Everyone wants you to be in the title match! Seriously: everyone does!! They all think that you deserve to have a title, Rokuroba-sensei!!"

Tears start pouring down the elementary school girl's face as she winds up to deliver a knockout blow.

"The only one who isn't serious is you, Rokuroba-sensei!!"

"....."

Well, this is weird.

All those aches and pains are gone I can move just fine.

The fighting spirit that has been snoozing inside me is back with a vengeance. Pain? What pain?

I'm on fire.

Burning so hot that I kick the covers right off.

I have to play Shogi right now, and nothing is going to stop me.

So make something clear to the teary elementary school girl in front of me.

“..... You know what that means, right? My winning puts you further away from the title match.”

“I know that!”

Ai roughly wipes the tears away with her entire forearm and glares at me.

“I’ll win, too! You won’t get your chance at a title if you lose!”

“Heh.”

I almost snorted through my nose at this little puppy trying her best to be intimidating.

If two players in the Women’s Legend League finish with the same number of victory stars, they do a playoff match to determine the Challenger.

If I win and she does Ai and I will be tied.

It means we’ll have another chance to face off, fair and square.

I’ll battle against Ai Hinatsuru at her best.

That is a match I absolutely have to play.

“We both win, we do a playoff. Once that happens, we should go right to the association and have them broadcast our match live!”

“YES!!”

—Yep, she doesn’t get it.

I watch the simpleminded elementary school girl celebrate with glee and whisper silently to myself: Thanks. If it hadn’t been for you I wouldn’t have reached the board, either.

THE SIMULTANEOUS FINAL MATCHES

The final matches of the Women's Legend League were scheduled to take place at the same time.

All ten members of the league have gathered at Tokyo's Shogi Association Building not only to play the five matches that determine the Women's Legend Title challenger, but also to determine who will be eliminated from the league this season.

In this extremely competitive league where four out of the ten won't be returning next year, even a title holder was at risk of tasting this agony.

That was particularly true this season because one victory star is all that separates those who have a chance to challenge for the title from those who won't be returning for another shot next season.

With a record of five wins and three losses, there were three competing to move on to the title match: Machi Kugui, Tamayo Rokuroba and Ai Hinatsuru.

Even Ryou Tsukiyomizaka, with an even record of four and four, was in danger of being eliminated—.

"Morning, Ryoie."

Rin Koiiji Women's 4-dan greeted Women's King Ryou Tsukiyomizaka, her opponent for today's match, the way she always did when she came into the arena. But Rin continued wiping down the Shogi board, nonetheless.

"Sorry. I'll be done in a sec."

"Don't worry about it there's still plenty of time. Clean it as much as you want."

She then sat down on the cushion with a hard thud and started fidgeting with her fan, opening and closing it as if already bored.

In actuality, Ryou came into the arena much earlier than usual with the intention of cleaning the board herself.

Rin wiped the surface yet again with a grimace and said, “When I first saw the schedule, never did I think we’d both be playing to stay in the league on the final day. It’s, like, a real shocker.”

“Heh! No idiot thinks they’re gonna drop out before things get started.”

“I wonder?”

“Huh?”

“*After* seeing you play that first match, I’ve been worried about it all the time.”

“.....!”

Ryou’s opponent in the opening match.

She——was Ai Hinatsuru Women’s 1-*dan*.

Rin worked as the match recorder that day. In the world of Women’s Shogi, it wasn’t uncommon for a Women’s 4-*dan* to record an elementary school girl’s match due to the limited number of match recorders available.

“You won that Shogi and all, Ryoie, but it was Miss Hinatsuru’s play that put me on notice. Sure, I could feel her unbelievable talent shining through, but with the whirlwind blowing in the Women’s Shogi world, I felt embarrassed for us

Rin took the now-glistening Shogi board into her arms.

“So, getting the boot this season was pretty much like a done deal Besides, I feel like I’ve been on a downward slide ever since I lost my title. I hate being used to feeling like this, so I’m not giving up until the very end! So with my renewed go-getter attitude, I came in early to wipe down the board. I can’t exactly cling to it once the match starts——.”

“Hey.”

“Hm?”

Ryou held out one hand and didn’t mince words with her opponent.

“Hand over that cloth. Gimme a turn.”

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka was in danger of losing her place in spite of her four and four record.

Holding the same record was Azami Hanadachi, but she was safe from elimination due to her place at number one in the rankings at the beginning of the season.

However this is no frivolous match.

In fact, it could be said that the key to reaching the title match rested in Azami's hands.

A victory by her opponent, Tamayo Rokuroba, would trigger a playoff. Thus, their match drew the bulk of the media's attention.

Plus, early speculation stated that Azami had the edge.

Without the pressure of a chance to challenge for the title or elimination bearing down on her shoulders, Azami was free to play exactly as she desired—.

Upon seeing Azami for the first time in a long while, an unexpected revelation shocked Tamayo to her very core.

“Umgh!! P-Pardon me Urgggghhh!!”

The woman sitting across the board from her had the complexion of a corpse. It was enough to make Tamayo completely forget about her own condition.

“B-Big Sister Azami Are you——?”

“..... Yes. With a bun in the oven

Tamayo keeled over backward.

“This is my third, so I thought I was used to morning sickness Even so, this is the worst it's ever been

“A-Are you sure you should be here?! I mean, pregnancies don't stabilize until the second trimester, right?!”

Being an only child, Tamayo had never witnessed her own mother's experience of morning sickness. This was her first time seeing its full extent in

person. Her opponent was in no condition to play Shogi, she thought.

Azami looked at her kind junior and strung these words together.

“Sitting here and playing Shogi won’t affect the baby one little bit. Just there may be some moments that will be hard for you to watch during our match. I apologize in advance.”

She pressed her handkerchief to her mouth and lowered her head. Tamayo, still unsure how to react, voiced a more important message.

“Oh, um, no problem. And Congratulations? I can say that, right?”

“Thank you. And yes, of course.”

Her junior’s well-wishes nearly brought a smile to Azami’s lips.

She then neatly folded her handkerchief and placed it in her lap. Sitting up straight, she said with grace and dignity, “Play with all your might. I will be playing in a way that the baby in my tummy can be proud of. So, Tamayo, please play Shogi worthy of someone who may be calling themselves the Women’s Legend Challenger.”

“..... I will!!”

—Well, how about that? I *am* lucky.

Tamayo had been convinced that luck had completely abandoned her, when in fact it was stronger than ever.

Though her relationship with the Shogi gods had soured of late, she sent up a quick prayer of gratitude.

It was not because her opponent was suffering from morning sickness, however.

It was to thank them for allowing one of the most important matches in her life to come against the very person who she revered above all others and who had taught her what it meant to be a professional. That was the luck.

The very bottom of the rankings... opened with three consecutive losses.

Now Ai Hinatsuru Women’s 1-*dan* controlled her own destiny after five

consecutive wins and has become the undisputed dark horse of the season.

The only reason Tamayo and Azami's match was drawing more publicity was that her opponent was just far too strong.

She had momentum. Her Shogi breathed with vitality.

However there were some opponents against whom momentum alone won't suffice. This match appeared to be over before it began. Ai had been earmarked for a loss in the final ever since the schedule was announced.

That opponent—was only the second Women's player to receive an Eternal Queen designation after Women's Legend Rina Shakando herself. A special player in a league of her own.

"It has been too long, Ai."

"..... It is nice to see you again. Kugui-*sensei*."

Machi spoke casually, as if it were a greeting like any other. Ai, on the other hand, went still as a board.

The two had enough connections to be considered close.

When Ai Yashajin challenged for the Queen title, it was Ai Hinatsuru who worked as the match journalist.

Machi was the person who helped the rookie writer find her footing. Therefore, Ai Hinatsuru referred to Machi as Mato-*sensei* when she was dressed as a journalist. Additionally, Ai's friend and fellow player Ayano Sadatou is also Machi Kugui's younger sister apprentice.

Machi had become a role model, even an older sister of sorts to Ai after hearing all the praise Ayano had for her.

Going against such a person for the first time on this grand stage had taken its toll on Ai's nerves. The fact that she left for Tokyo without so much as a goodbye only made their reunion more uncomfortable.

"I do hope you are well? Had we not been pitted against one another in such a big match, I would have hoped for the chance to catch up properly over dinner"

Machi started a conversation to break the ice. Ai's nerves gave out. She couldn't even muster a response.

"Ayano and Charlette have expressed their loneliness time and again ever since your departure. Given the chance, do arrange to see them, will you not?"

"Ah"

"And——."

With the face of an angel, Machi rammed a blade of words right through the 11-year-old girl's heart.

"*Yaichi* has spoken of you *every day* as well. He has asked me to check up on your well-being."

"!!"

Ai visibly trembled. That reaction was exactly what Machi had been hoping to see.

——How will she respond when she learns our connection runs deeper?

Every move would undoubtedly put Ai through even more anguish.

As Machi acknowledged that the two would become lifelong rivals, she was bound and determined to crush Ai's heart beneath her feet.

The thing that had supported that heart, her last bastion.

——Mistakes of the past will not be repeated. *I refuse to make the same missteps I made with Ginko Sora ever again.*

Yamashiro Ouka Machi Kugui lined up the pieces on the board with refined grace as she smiled with the wiliness of a fox that has lived for a millennium.

"'Tis our first match. Let it be worthy of being remembered for a lifetime."

And so, the appointed time arrived.

"When you're ready!!"

Ten voices united from across five Shogi boards.

They echoed throughout the arena like an enchanting melody.

For dreams, determination, pride and glory.

Each fought for the ground they refused to yield as the final match of the Women's Legend League began.

OBSERVERS

“May both Ai Hinatsuru and Tamayo Rokuroba suffer the most humiliating defeats!!”

Contemplating my beloved apprentice’s outburst, I find it rather out of place and ask a question.

“Were you not close with the fledgling?”

“I couldn’t care less, hah! Turning down accommodation with one such as I, at the palace in which we dwell, in order to reside with the resident of the Women’s Shogi gutter, that Rokuroba!! Sharing a roof with that YouTuber Worse, her followers greatly outnumber mine! Why? One such as I am much younger and cuter and stronger!!”

My second apprentice, Maria Kannabe expresses her frustration by stomping her feet.

Maria’s older brother by birth and older brother apprentice by Shogi lineage, Ayumu Kannabe **8-dan**, sighs under his breath at his younger sister’s display before posing his own question for me.

“So, what will come to pass is that you will be defending your title against Machi the Tormentor, yes Master? Though I must admit that her playing style today is rather unlike her”

“Indeed”

The match record displayed on my monitor differs greatly from the current Machi Kugui.

However the gleam of talent shining through each of her moves strikes me as nostalgic.

In order to recall I reach for one particular photograph.

“Do you remember this day, God Cauldron? What transpired?”

“That is not a day I could ever forget. For it is the day that determined my destiny.”

It was a special day for me as well.

The day that I met four promising elementary school-aged players while doing commentary on the big board.

“That day, Yaichi Kuzuryu and Ryou Tsukiyomizaka fought for the honor of becoming Elementary Meijin. However the ones who truly caught my eye were yourself and Machi Kugui.”

Gazing at the picture that all of us took together, I harken back to the final rounds of that tournament.

Every time I look at my beloved apprentice growing ever closer to becoming the ideal Shogi player, it assures me that my ability to identify talent is spot-on.

It was Yaichi Kuzuryu who claimed a title first.

However the first to reach A Division the first to arrive on the Meijin’s doorstep was the one I selected: Ayumu Kannabe.

“Do you remember why Machi cried so much?”

“Yes.”

My newly promoted A Division apprentice responds without a moment’s delay.

“Because she *missed a check path*.”

“Precisely. *Machi had all but won*. She defeated Ryou in nearly every sense throughout the match until the very end. That mistake pained her beyond belief, thus her tears. After that——.”

The experience changed her forever.

“She began to employ the *anaguma*, so such a mistake would never be her downfall again. Should a risky path and a safe path be available to her, Machi chooses the safe path without fail. Showing no interest in the Sub League, she became a Women’s Player and tailed the young Ryo as a journalist By watching a talent that glistened so brightly, she unknowingly averted her eyes from the talent that resided within her.”

In my eyes, doing so was nothing more than a sluggish suicide.

However——.

“Today’s Shogi, on the other hand! It’s as if as if she has returned to the young girl brimming with talent she was back then!!”

It has been a long while since I felt my bum leg was an inconvenience. I would like nothing more than to travel to the association building to witness Machi’s Shogi with my own two eyes at this very moment.

Not to see if she is worthy of challenging me No.

To see if she is worthy of taking up the mantle vacated by Snow White.

“Are you curious about today’s Shogi, Miss Yashajin?”

I’m so surprised to be asked in the middle of the meeting that the phone slips out of my hands.

It’s because the man I’m talking to shouldn’t be able to see.

“..... Yes. My older sister apprentice may challenge for a title depending on today’s match. Why wouldn’t I be curious?”

“Of course, I can hardly blame you. Would you tell me how the match is progressing?”

Once I pick my phone up off the floor, I explain the formations to him.

“Oh? Ms. Kugui is playing with the first move, but that is quite a form change to undergo in such an important match.”

“Very much so. Ai just naturally went with it. She’s on defense, too. But her opponent’s style is——.”

“Judging by the match record alone, she could easily be confused for another player.”

I didn’t say the player’s name.

Even though I know for a fact he will come back to me having proof of his affair with another woman shoved in my face like this is infuriating!

“..... By the way, how did you know I was tracking the match on my phone?”

“While I was unaware that you were looking at your phone, the aura of a person thinking about Shogi was emanating from you.”

“Huh? An aura?”

“Yes. At this distance, I can sense how deeply a person is focused on reading a board.”

“..... You are a monster. Is everyone in A Division like that?”

“Suffice it to say that we all are Masters of our craft,” says the man who could have been my Master with a seemingly bottomless smile before returning the topic back to business.

“This ability of mine has also been useful in negotiations. Even without the gift of sight, I still have the ability to read the content of another’s character.”

“Is that so? Did I pass your test?”

“But of course,” Shogi Association Chairman Seiichi Tsukimitsu says with a nod. “The Japanese Shogi Association will entrust your company with the renewal projects for both the Kanto and Kansai Association buildings. And your company shall compensate for the hole left in Women’s Shogi funding left by other sponsors’ withdrawal A long-term partnership has also been formed to support Women’s Shogi for the foreseeable future. Are there any details you wish to change?”

“That’s fine as it is. Let’s work together for mutual benefit.”

Since we don’t have a handshake custom, that’s all it took to finalize the deal. I might end up playing against this man, so I don’t intend on getting too friendly. Then again, Shogi players are basically business partners, so we know where the boundaries are anyway.

Oh yes. There’s something important I have to mention before I leave.

“Would you make sure the Yashajin Group name is kept out of the public eye? We back several official companies and will have one of their representatives attend press conferences. Oh, and don’t worry. They’ll be able to play Shogi.”

“Why do you make that request?”

Chairman Tsukimitsu sounds unsure of himself for the first time during the meeting.

“Your company has severed all ties with the black market, so I don’t foresee

any problems with the association announcing a full partnership"

Why, he asks? That should be obvious.

"Winning a title that I myself have sponsored would be just as embarrassing as planning my own birthday party. Yes?"

"..... Whew. Man, I just wrote some embarrassing stuff, didn't I"

I can't even look straight at the article I just printed out.

I'm trying to write the foreword and columns for my book before it gets submitted to the publisher, but it feels like I'm baring my heart and soul on the pages. Seriously, I get embarrassed before my fingers hit the keys. My face is burning up.

And I'm too distracted by the Woman's Legend League final so I can't concentrate.

"..... Might as well have a look."

Going across the room to pick up the smartphone that I purposely put out of reach, I take a look at the current formations and match records.

"Let's see, Ms. Hanadachi and Ms. Rokuroba are Huh?! Wh-Why are they playing so slow? I understand wanting to be careful, but"

For Ms. Rokuroba: win this match and she'll have her first shot at a title.

But Ms. Hanadachi doesn't have a shot to get in and isn't in danger of being knocked out of the league. So then, why is she spending over 30 minutes on one move in the early-game sometimes and playing right away when you'd think she should spend time thinking about others? Her lack of rhythm is just bizarre.

Things get even more chaotic as the match plays out.

"Wow Both of them have gotten so tired, they're using formations that I've never seen before How's this going to turn out?"

There's all lulled right now, and I don't think another move will be made anytime soon

So it's time to look at what I came here for.

“ Machi Kugui-Yamashiro Ouka  Ai Hinatsuru Women's 1-dan Double Wing Attack”

So they're playing a Double Wing.

That's one of Ai and my specialties. So it's not surprising that Ai rose to meet that challenge on defense.

But who could've seen this coming?

Machi the Tormentor, famous for using the highly defensive *anaguma*, is leaving her King lightly defended and using the opening move to attack!

“..... This is amazing, Ma-chan. How did you come so far so quickly?”

Her moves have a lively energy to them. The way she's using her big pieces borders on genius.

“Even the formations that don't look quite right were built in a way to maximize her big pieces' mobility. I don't think people will be able to understand the advantage she has right now.....”

What immediately comes to mind when I see it—is a nine-tailed fox.

It looks like a graceful princess who wouldn't hurt a fly at first glance.

“But its long tails will already be entwined across the board once it shows its real face. At this rate, you'll never get to play the late-game you're so good at She'll torment you into surrender.”

I whisper advice that I know will never be heard to the picture of my apprentice that has been posted to a live blog. It's been forever since I've seen her face.

Machi did an incredible job putting words to all these random ideas and senses I've got floating around my head.

It's extremely difficult for Shogi players to explain what they have in mind to someone else.

After all, it took tens of thousands of matches to develop those senses.

But by describing these senses in concrete words, it's possible for anyone to

think about it theoretically and apply those senses to their own Shogi in a short amount of time.

Machi Kugui is trying to prove her skills as an editor through this match.

At the same time she's also trying to prove that I wasn't Master material.

No matter how many times I hit the refresh button, Ai still hasn't played her next move

She looks like she's in so much more pain since she hacked off all that hair

"..... I've never had a way with words, so there's still a lot that never got said"

Closing the live blog, I get back to writing.

So that I can put these feelings into words for the people who matter the most.

"It might be too late, but"

There's just one thing I want to check on my phone before I do.

THE 5-MINUTE ETERNITY

Ai Hinatsuru's heart jumped the moment Machi Kugui used her first move to advance the Pawn in front of her Rook.

—Could this be a Double Wing Attack? With Kugui-*sensei*

Pulse racing to the point that she was concerned the thundering beats would reach her opponent across the board, Ai fought to remain as calm as possible as she advanced the Pawn in front of her own Rook.

Machi's fingers once again grasped the advanced Pawn. Moving it down the file further still set the formation.

—It is a Double Wing!

That was Ai's favorite style to play.

The type of Shogi she had played countless times against her Master, Yaichi Kuzuryu, had materialized in an all-important match that could qualify her to challenge for the title. Her heart soared with this stroke of incredible luck, as if her favorite type of problem had appeared on an entrance exam.

However, she couldn't help but feel something was amiss.

Why would Machi, a master of the *anaguma* formation, not only leave her King lightly defended, but choose to use Ai's best strategy at a time like this?

Ai glanced up at her opponent, hoping for a clue—.

“Te-he.”

“.....?!”

Their lines of sight collided, almost as if Machi had been lying in wait for that exact moment. Startled, Ai immediately looked back down at the board.

Machi then concealed half her face behind her fan, much like a lady of the court in an ancient painting from the Heian Era. She continued to observe the girl from over the edge. Even now, Ai could feel her gaze

“Pheeew————..... Okay!!”

In an effort to disperse all the needless thoughts running through her mind, Ai refocused her energy on constructing her formation.

Machi had selected a software-based Double Wing Attack sequence. It was the same strategy Ai had learned from her best friend, Mio Mizukoshi, and she had been taught a harsh lesson using it against Ryou Tsukiyomizaka.

As well as what she used in her last match against Yaichi.

— I won't lose! Master is the only one who could ever beat me with it!!

Although on defense, Ai set herself up for an aggressive attack.

Machi, on the other hand, arranged her pieces as if defending.

“..... Subway Rook? Is she trying to counter me?”

Just when it appeared as though Machi would unleash her Rook from an early stage, she slid it back to the deepest row before bringing it over to the eighth file only to slide it right back to the second. This sequence ultimately resulted in one move loss.

Machi's maneuver gave her control of the area, but Ai advancing her Bishop to the front lines effectively pinned it in place.

Plus, her eagle eyes were vigilant in their search for an opening to bring her own Rook barreling into her opponent's formation.

Ai took aim for Machi's defenseless Bishop, which hadn't moved from its original position.

Sensing the danger, Machi—.

“How frightening. Best run and hide,” she whispers while pulling the Bishop to safety deep within her formation.

“..... Yes!!”

Ai saw the formations lining up in her favor.

—Now Kugui-*sensei*'s Bishop is trapped! Her Rook, too!!

The newly retreated Bishop now serves as a boulder that blocks the underground tunnel Machi had dug for her Rook to travel. Both big pieces had been rendered useless.

“Kh!”

What’s more, Machi deploys one of her valuable Pawns directly in the spot that her Bishop just vacated.

It was as if Ai’s Rook struck fear in her heart.

“Kh Kh, kh Kh

Machi’s shoulders quivered up and down. The slightest of sounds came from her crimson lips.

—Is Kugui-*sensei* trembling?

Ai looked up from the board and glanced at her opponent once again.

“Khe-he.”

“?! ”

Machi Kugui—was cackling.

“Haaa You disappoint me, Ai.”

Machi closed the fan to reveal the last expression Ai expected to see.

Then, the wily fox of a young woman gently caressed the side of the Shogi board before raising the same hand to gracefully flutter about the pieces.

“You resided with Yaichi for one year and eight months in total and yet were unable to connect with him as deeply as I have while spending a mere 10 days in the same room.”

“?! ”

From there, Machi set in motion what could only be described as a special attack.

“Ah!! ”

Ai gasped with a shock so great it was as if heaven and earth had been turned on their heads.



“Th-The Bishop?! How did it get to the front when it was trapped all the way in the back?!”

Simply pulling a defensive Silver back opened the path for Machi to slide her Bishop directly front and center of her formation.

She used a diagonal path through pieces that was both difficult for human beings to recognize and a signature software technique.

The match had only just begun, and yet Ai knew how far behind she had fallen.

Machi’s big pieces had several times more mobility than her own.

Horizontal and vertical lanes were now at her Rook’s disposal. Meanwhile, her Bishop had a clear, unobstructed view of the entire board.

Their paths intertwined like long tails—the terrifying nine-tailed fox had shown her true form!

However, even more terrifying than that was.....

“Here, here, here, here, here, here N-No, that won’t work!! There aren’t any attack paths no matter where I read They’re all blocked by that one Pawn!!”

The single Pawn Machi had deployed deep in her territory.

Ai had assumed it was to block her Rook, but it also served to stifle her Bishop. The more Ai read into that blind spot, the more it became agonizingly obvious how good that move had been.

“This style of Shogi, it’s almost almost like M- Mas-”

The fluidity and creativity of how she played reminded Ai so much of him that she nearly spoke his name.

“We have but merely begun, Ai.”

Machi leaned across the board to get her face as close to the young girl as possible and spoke his name without hesitation.

“Allow me to demonstrate just how deeply Yaichi and I have connected As thoroughly as possible.”

Each of the Women's League players fought with every ounce of her being across the five Shogi boards in the arena.

As both a chance for a title and the threat of elimination loomed in all sorts of complicated scenarios, the matches naturally proceeded at a snail's pace. Great care was taken not to fall too far behind as precious seconds of waiting time slipped away.

Thus a sudden announcement from one of the match recorders went through the room like a tidal wave.

"Hinatsuru-sensei. You have 10 minutes remaining. At what point would you like me to start counting down?"

"From right now, please!"

Tamayo Rokuroba heard all of this unfold from her spot at the next board over. Enduring the pain in her abdomen, she looked at that board out of the corner of her eye.

She could see Ai swaying back and forth like a metronome, reading as fast as she possibly could as the match recorder announced the time behind her. The girl's cheeks were dotted with beads of sweat that she



didn't have the time or the mental leeway to wipe off.

For the countdown to have already begun that meant Ai had used far more waiting time than her opponent.

—.....I don't even have to see the board to know how it's going.

Even so, her curiosity got the better of her. Formations she had never seen before greeted her eyes.

“Wh-What even is that?! I don't get it”

As a Ranging Rook player herself, Static Rook strategies may as well have been foreign languages to Tamayo.

However, the Shogi unfolding next to her was unrecognizable as a language at all. Her best guess was that the match was reaching the end of the mid-game, but beyond that

“Five minutes remaining.”

After hearing the match recorder, now it was Tamayo's opponent's turn to whisper under her breath.

“..... Five minutes left in that situation? In her shoes, I would run out of time before figuring out what move to make”

Sweat leaked out as Static Rook player Azami Hanadachi spoke. Even Ryou Tsukiyomizaka, who was playing on the board furthest away, couldn't help but snap her tongue when she peeked over Ai's shoulder on her way to the restroom.

Though Tamayo had a different interpretation.

—Knowing you, that's more than enough time. I've seen it before.

Looking at Ai's intense concentration, Tamayo thought back to one particular night.

It was their first day living together. Ai won fifty consecutive matches under the pressure of a countdown clock online. That type of winning streak was beyond ridiculous.

Even more ridiculous, however, was what she said following her fiftieth victory: *I missed the shortest path to checkmate in the last match. May I please*

play another?

Yeesh She must be head over heels for Shogi.

So she'll be fine.

When it came to Ai Hinatsuru—five minutes was an eternity.

The move that Ai finally decided to make at the five-minute remaining mark was within Machi's realm of expectation.

“Um-hmm.”

She nodded and turned to the match recorder.

“May I inquire as to how much time I have remaining?”

“63 minutes.”

Forcing that announcement was an off-the-board tactic on Machi's part.

—It seems I have used more time than I anticipated working through this unfamiliar mid-game.

Even so, Machi had over twelve times as much time at her disposal than Ai.

A comfortable lead, to say the least.

“Now then, shall I torment you from a distance or proceed to the late-game with all this time to spare? Which way *would he prefer*?” Machi whispered just loud enough for Ai to hear and waited for a reaction When suddenly.

“..... What intensity?!”

Such a flash of heat washed over Machi's face that she inadvertently closed her eyes.

“Static electricity? I’m certain I saw something akin to fireworks just now

A singed scent prickled her nose.

Machi carefully opened her eyes.

At that moment, Ai was——.

"Herehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere"

Focused solely on the board between them.

The board only grew more complicated with each passing move.

“Kugui-sensei. You have 30 minutes remaining.”

“Aye.”

Machi confirmed the waiting time and took a deep breath. Though she had lost half of her waiting time, she still had 30 minutes to work with. Six times more than Ai’s mere five minutes——.

“Huh?”

The fact that the amount of waiting time for one of them hadn’t changed in the slightest shook Machi to her very bones.

“Ai’s waiting time hasn’t decreased at all?”

In other words, Ai had been consistently playing each of her moves in less than a minute since she hit the five-minute remaining mark.

Normally, playing at that speed would cause a fatal mistake and the match would be over instantaneously. Not to mention that this type of late-game had never been seen before. Experience was worthless. Even a professional Shogi player shouldn’t be able to consistently play the correct moves with so little time to think.

For some reason, however, Machi could not pull away. No matter what move she made, no matter what complex sequences she set into motion, Ai played the correct counter instantaneously.

Then, with the formations still dead even——.

“Kugui-sensei. You have 10 minutes remaining. When would you like me to begin the countdown?”

“Huh?! R-Right now No! At five minutes!!”

It wasn’t going down.

Ai’s remaining waiting time hovered in place, but hers had decreased.

“Khh?!”

She had utterly dominated the apprentice, Ai Hinatsuru, throughout the early- and mid-game using her deep connection with Yaichi Kuzuryu.

However, Machi and Machi alone had been forced to commit an enormous amount of waiting time once they entered the late-game.

That fact led to one conclusion.

“Interesting I may have taken you too lightly. To think that your connection to Yaichi ran this deep, Ai

Deep, deep.

Deeper and deeper, Ai and Yaichi’s bond plunged deeper than she ever expected.

“However! ...when it comes to depth, I shall not be defeated!!”

That was a source of great pride for Machi Kugui. Pride in the fact that she understood Yaichi better than anyone else. Pride in that, with the exception of Ginko Sora, she had interacted with Yaichi at the deepest level for the longest time. Pride due to the fact that she had been the first to recognize the true value of Kuzuryu-style Shogi.

At the same time, however....

—This visage: where have I seen it before

The way Ai absorbed herself in the board during the late-game bore a surprising resemblance to Yaichi. Specifically, it reminded her of him just before making his inhuman 7 Seven Rook promotion move in the First Crown Title Match

Another detail felt amiss.

As matches progressed, more time was normally required to think before the next move. This was because unknown formations were bound to arise more frequently in the later stages.

Ai, however, seemed to work in the other direction.

She played as *if she already knew exactly how the match was going to play out.*

“?! It couldn’t be?”

At last Machi connected the dots.

The book she had assumed she was the first to read....

The one she had worked as the editor for....

Yaichi Kuzuryu's maiden release....

In fact, there was more than one author.

Yaichi Kuzuryu's Shogi story *had two contributors*.

"..... Yaichi absorbed his late-game abilities from Ai?"

The meaning of the word *supervisor* that Yaichi had said when they parted.

The late-game, which loomed beyond early-and mid-games that no one had ever seen before.

If things that should only be reflected in Yaichi Kuzuryu's eyes but could also be seen by Ai Hinatsuru

"H-Have I made a mistake in my reading? Underestimating the size of Ai's impact?"

Master and apprentice.

That type of bond was not so shallow as to be explained in words.

Ai and Yaichi had such an enormous influence on one another that they opened the door to a brand new type of Shogi.

If that were true.....

Their meeting—was no coincidence, but essential.

A dramatic event that started a brand new chapter in Shogi's 1,000-plus year history.

—In terms of Shogi alone, her bond runs even deeper than that of Ginko?!

Machi's fighting spirit shattered that *idea the moment it entered her mind*.

"Crush! I must crush her while I have the chance!!"

What would happen once *Kuzuryu's Notebook* was released and its essence

absorbed by every Shogi player on earth?

All matches would enter a late-game that could only be read by Ai Hinatsuru.

Who would become the best in such a world?

The answer to that question—was blazing in front of Machi Kugui's eyes at this very moment.

"Herehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere
"Crush."

Ai's overwhelming inferno of an advance was bearing down on her, but Machi rode out to crush it in its tracks. She even removed her self-imposed restriction on manipulating her opponents' breathing patterns with the timing of her moves, an off-the-board tactic.

“Crush, crush, crush, crush, crushcrushcrushcrush!! Crush, strangle, pulverize!!”

Painful memories bubbled to the forefront of her mind.

—I hesitated to crush Ginko at the very last moment in our first match.

She couldn't bring herself to cut off the young girl's breathing that day.

The 12-year-old Machi Kugui lacked the resolve to put that sickly girl who was several years her junior through this kind of pain and suffering.

Then, losing their two encounters changed Machi's life forever.

She had lost her right to his name the first time.

She had been proven inferior in the second.

“The third I refuse to falter a third time!”

So Machi had every intent to kill this 11-year-old girl. She must show that she was number one and would stop at nothing to be that.

"Ginko I have come to accept!! But this girl, this girl, I!!"



Machi dug deep within herself and sought the correct moves with all the strength she could muster in this never-before-seen late-game!

However an emotionless announcement was made immediately.

"Kugui-sensei. You are now playing one-minute Shogi."

“?! My waiting time exceeding one hour has vanished?”

Meanwhile Ai's waiting time still held steady at five minutes.

The absurdity of it made Machi scream.

“Why hasn’t it decreased?! Why Why WHY?!! I had an abundance of waiting time, SO WHY?!”

I was more!

I was more!!

I WAS MORE!!

She continued counting up the reasons why she should win this match but that did nothing to keep her formation from deteriorating before her eyes.

All her meticulous preparation. The time she had committed to constructing the story. All of that amounted to nothing in the face of this overwhelming power.

This talent.

Machi fought back against the senselessness of it all.

“Crush! CRUSH!! GET CRUUUUUUUUUUUSHED!!!”

With every ounce of her being, Machi the Tormentor yelled at the top of her lungs as she put forth a move that she believed was the correct answer.

Once she took her hand away.

“Hereherehereherehereherehere_____.”

Ai's incessant swaying ended in a sudden silent stop.

The heat she exuded zeroed in on one specific point.

Then——.

“Here.”

Ai Hinatsuru calmly made her move. She put Machi in check.

Her demeanor made the announcement so much more eloquently than words ever could.

I have read to victory.

Plain and simple.

Machi, on the other hand, had yet to reach a conclusion. Breathing sporadically, she scratched her scalp nonstop as she desperately searched for an exit path for her King—.

“A-Ahhhn! Time There is no time!!”

So much remained to be read in this complex late-game formation. At the very least, it looked that way to Machi because she couldn’t see a checkmate yet.

However she did not have enough time at her disposal to know one way or the other.

—..... This is the end of the line, is it?

Had she been able to see the goal line, there was no doubt Machi would have kept running.

Unfortunately, this late-game was an endless labyrinth straight out of hell. A veritable stream of expert-



level Shogi puzzles had driven her mind to the brink of exhaustion and broken her fighting spirit.

“Whew I have lost. It seems as though I was unable to read to the end of this one”

A loss but a gratifying one.

She had been daunted by Ai’s late-game prowess.

When it came to the early-and mid-game, though, she had proven that it was she who had the most thorough understanding of Yaichi.

And, thanks to the late-game skills that Ai had demonstrated, this Shogi match was bound to send waves through the Shogi world.

She gained enough material by simply reaching the late-game.

—*My true aim is not for a title, nor is it to defeat Ai.*

All that remained was to set the scene for a beautiful death.

Machi searched for a respectable place to surrender within the realm of one-minute Shogi, a way to end the match record with grace and dignity.

However.

—B-But am I truly checkmated?! Surrendering when not necessary would be?!

She couldn’t go through with it.

Despite knowing she had already lost, Machi couldn’t surrender because she couldn’t see the checkmate with her own eyes. Her fingers drifted left and right over the board, unable to take her own life In the end, they played a move that would prolong what life she had left.

When.

“Here.”

Ai played her move using no waiting time whatsoever.

The final frames she drew up for this brand new late-game were as complex as they were bizarre. The Shogi puzzle that interwove several human blind spots was incredibly long and Machi was still unable to solve it.

“Ah Check! Ahhh Agh?”

Finding an answer with the seconds bearing down on her was impossible. Even Machi Kugui, a Women’s Title Holder in her prime, was unable to read to the end.

“Here.”

No time.

“Eeek Eeep!!”

Not afforded the luxury of composing herself as the seconds ticked by, all Machi could do was frantically move her fingers up and down the board. They hovered just above the surface as her King ran for his life.

As for that King——

“Here.”

Ai’s fingers steadily drove it into the corner.

Using no time.

“Ah Ngh Ah, agh”

She wouldn’t allow a pristine surrender.

As her King was being pelted by a high-speed check rush that wouldn’t let up long enough for it to fall, Machi cursed the girl and her absurd talent despite her fleeting consciousness.

——Invincible, this one.

Not a single Women’s player stood a chance against Ai in this type of late-game.

No.

The day when it would ensnare professional players was not far off. The more *Kuzuryu’s Notebook* spread into society, the more beastly Ai’s talent would become.

——Once it does, what will this girl aim to accomplish?

Yaichi Kuzuryu became the Demon King.

Although she won't intend to, those massive wings of hers will encompass the entire Shogi world and those sharp claws will hurt the ones she loves most.

Where will Ai Hinatsuru fly to in that dark world? Machi was curious in much the same way she was the first time she witnessed Yaichi Kuzuryu's Shogi.

A beast so powerful that she was entranced by her own destruction.

Machi understood better than anyone that this was Shogi's true form, Shogi talent's true form——.

"Pardon me."

Ai, who had long since read the check path, quietly finishes it with her last move.

A Gold deployed in front of the King.

It took losing in much the same way a novice would for Machi to finally see that checkmate.

"..... A one-step checkmate? F-For shame"

Machi trembled as the humiliation began to sink in. Turning pale, she lowered her head in a bow.

"I-I have no remaining options. There are no moves left for me"

Even the second Eternal Queen in history suffered this indignity.

All who watched over Machi during that late-game felt a cold chill of fear run down their spines.

Ai Hinatsuru Women's 1-*dan* claimed victory.

After starting the league season with three consecutive losses, she finished with a six-match winning streak. Defeating Yamashiro Ouka moved her to the top of the standings.

The small *Ryuo's Fledgling* had taken flight with her own wings.

And now she knew how to hunt with her own claws in the middle of the Metropolis.

▲ FIRST-TIME CHALLENGE

Since important matches were still taking place in the arena, review sessions were held in a separate room.

“..... Ah, I see now. That is the check path that eluded my eyes”

Machi was finally able to come to terms with her loss as Ai explained the sequence to her.

The move that she had seen as necessary to bid farewell to her past had in fact placed her in the grips of an instant death.

This loss was extremely painful, on par with one she experienced years ago in the Elementary Meijin Tournament.

“Ai.”

Winning in the way that she had, Ai found it awkward to say anything else. Machi decided to thank her instead.

“I am grateful? *This would be checkmate.*”

“You are?”

Now that the pieces were back in their box, Machi stood to leave. As she was walking toward the door, she said, “I shall inform Yaichi that you are right as rain. He will be most pleased... with your victory.”

“Ah”

Ai rose to her knees as if about to pursue Machi out the door but stopped herself at the last possible moment.

—What would I say if I went? I made up my mind to work hard here in Tokyo.....

Ai stood motionless staring at the closed door.

Something strange had caught her attention.

“Was Kugui-sensei *smiling*? Right after losing out on her chance to be in the title match?”

Machi's expression did strike her as odd, considering how much pain she would be in after such a loss. However, something else was far more important to her at the moment.

“..... Rokuroba-sensei!”

Sitting back down on the sofa, Ai brought her hands together as if praying and awaited Tamayo's arrival.

She lacked the courage to go back into the arena herself.

The match was a slugfest.

“Haaaa ngh, why'd the Shogi have to turn out like this?”

A weary Tamayo was in quite a bit of pain as she sat in front of the board, her listless eyes vaguely in the direction of an intensely dialed-in Azami as she waited for the next move.

They were in the late-game, but trading body blows. Worse, they had each missed check paths that would have sealed their victory. The board had warped into an enigma.

Simply put: it was a big mess.

“..... I can't believe I missed that one.”

Around the time she defeated Ryo Tsukiyomizaka in the middle of the season, her fingers seemed to be unconsciously drawn to the best move. She had won so many matches in a row that way, but now

No. She knew. She understood why winning had become so difficult.

Ai Hinatsuru being so close had made her think that she should be able to checkmate her opponents in much the same way.

So she started making mistakes she wouldn't have made otherwise and lost two matches in a row before recovering in the previous round. Had she been able to relax and rely on her own talent, the ticket to the Women's Legend Title Match would have been hers long before the final match.

There was one other thing.

—I wasn't sure if I deserved to be the challenger, was I?

She considered herself to be the hardest worker.

Her talent may leave something to be desired, but as a Women's League player She took so much pride in her work that others belittled her as the *Professional Women's League Player*. She was also confident that she had contributed more to the league than players who were blessed with better circumstances.

However, watching Ai shook that confidence.

The fact that she was younger, more talented and cuter didn't matter.

—It's because I found out she's fighting harder than me

The Shogi that unfolded on the board next to hers had been a fearsome sight to behold.

She thought there was a chance Ai might win.

But never in her wildest dreams did she think Ai would torment Machi the Tormentor to the point of a one-step checkmate and never give her an opportunity to surrender.

“Ha-ha She is a little demon.”

Ai Hinatsuru appearing in a title match would surely turn Japan on its head.

All these random thoughts passed through Tamayo's mind as menstrual cramps made her life miserable. Focusing was no longer possible. She hadn't been in the right condition to play decently in the first place.

But.

—I can't make any excuses, can I? I mean my opponent is pregnant

Azami had raced out of the arena only to return with a bluish complexion several times already. Tamayo had heard stories about morning sickness, but it was fearsome to see it from across the board with her own eyes.

“..... Normal for women? This? Yeah right”

Menstrual cramps and morning sickness.

While the two conditions weren't anatomically possible from men, they most

definitely existed in this world.

Although, pointing that out would get her labeled as naïve.

She had given up at some point during it all, made the decision to keep her mouth shut and learned to pass it off by repeating fake smiles and short responses.

—But, you know something?! All of us are still fighting all the same!! With our lives on the line!!

She wouldn't deny that she wanted to make the best possible match record while in the best possible condition.

Even though there were circumstances that couldn't be made public, she still wanted someone to understand that today's match record was forged through a great deal of pain.

"Hanadachi-sensei. You have 10 minutes remaining. When shall I start the countdown?"

"....."

Azami was too exhausted to answer the match recorder. Seeing her continue to fight even though she was far beyond her limits gave Tamayo an even stronger respect for her and made her strongly wish she could comfort her pain at the same time.

".....?"

Azami continued to read as if her life depended on it until the three-minutes remaining mark—and let out a long sigh.

"I thought if I devoted myself entirely to Shogi, I could finally get a title."

".....?"

Tamayo watched with surprise as her opponent suddenly started telling a story.

—Is she surrendering? No, the match recorder hadn't stopped the clock yet

She had not given up. However, something within her wanted to add a punctuation mark at this juncture.

At the same time, she was trying to send her junior a message.

Tamayo fixed her posture and waited to hear what her esteemed senior had to say.

“I was wrong. The happiness I was sacrificing turned out to have no connection with Shogi in the end. Losing everything to Ginko is what made me realize it

The First Queen, Azami Hanadachi.

The woman who appeared to have grasped the greatest happiness a woman could want and had once been stoic enough to be nicknamed Thorn Princess revealed what she had learned after her loss.

“Fighting through adversity with effort doesn’t necessarily make you stronger.”

“.....!”

“So, I decided to find a way to be happy and get stronger at the same time! To find a way to get everything I’d always wanted! Shogi, family, everything! I decided that I wanted a son no matter what after having two daughters, but I could still tell my Shogi was getting stronger even though I was pregnant. My best years aren’t behind me. I’m the strongest I’ve ever been right now.”

The soon-to-be mother of three and Women’s League player declared all this as her chest swelled with pride. Then she made the message crystal clear for her junior sitting across the board.

“So, it’s okay for you to try, too, Tamayo. You’re much too attentive to others’ needs Being so nice and endearing is just who you are. But it’s okay to say what you want. You don’t have to suffer first to find happiness.”

Then Azami made her move.

“It’s up to you to take it. That doesn’t mean I’m going to hand it over, though!”

Tamayo was so shocked by the move that she forgot to breathe.

Her opponent wasn’t trying to advance to victory, but instead trying to bring order to the chaos.

She left it up to her.

Azami had most likely run out of steam.

Rather than force her mind to reach the end of the sequence it may not achieve, she elected to have Tamayo make the decision. It was as if she were saying, “You find the answer.”

“.....!! There are two paths”

Go for the checkmate or strengthen her defense. A simple 50-50.

However, between her own exhaustion and menstrual cramps, Tamayo knew that no amount of reading with the limited time she had left would ever lead her to the correct answer.

She was better off closing her eyes and relying on luck.

She wasn’t Ai Hinatsuru, after all.

“The path I’ll take is——.”

Tamayo Rokuroba’s hand trembled as she reached for the board.

Reached to take what she truly wanted.

Despite the growing noise outside the door, Ai still couldn’t raise her head.

“.....”

Her heart was on the verge of exploding.

What was the result? If Tamayo won, was she allowed to be happy for her?

The thumping of footsteps filled the hallway. The journalists had arrived with their cameras clicking nonstop.

A familiar echo of high heels emerged through the din.

The same echoes she had been chasing ever since she came to Tokyo were closing in and stopped right outside the door.

——What if Rokuroba-sensei lost? If I’m the one going to the title match, what do I?

Ker-chak.

“!!”

Hearing the click of the door made Ai jump to her feet as if she'd been shot out of a cannon.

Tamayo stood there.

“..... Sensei”

Their eyes met, and Tamayo smiled.

She looked right at the girl and said in the same voice she always did.

“Congrats.”

All her thoughts and feelings were jam-packed into that one little word.

“_____!!”

Ai collapsed on the spot in tears.

She greeted her first-ever title match not with a smile, but with sobs.

“I couldn't take the path to the title match I've always dreamed about, but I think there's another path I had to take before I do.”

Were her words intended for the girl crying on the floor or for herself?

Either way, Tamayo began talking in a serene tone.

“If I blew by it and punched a ticket to a title match first Well, I'm not sure I'd ever get around to the other path. Looking at it that way, I can accept how things turned out today. Not that losing doesn't sting!”

Azami had chosen the path that let herself seize happiness while continuing to improve.

So Tamayo had decided to pursue what she truly wanted.

That being—traveling the rest of life's journey with the player who guided her to Shogi in the first place. Her mind was made up.

She would trail him no matter how long it took, and then take him in the end. Tamayo had decided to do what she thought was right even though she

couldn't read to the end. That was the only way she could move forward.

Just that move in today's match was the absolute worst she could have made and resulted in an instant death—.

The Thorn Princess had commented during their review session, *"You love Shogi, don't you?"*

So this was okay. She had no regrets.

..... Though she had to visit the restroom to fix her makeup beforehand.

"But that's not true for you, is it?"

Tamayo gently placed her hand on Ai's head as she spoke.

"Ai Hinatsuru didn't move all the way to Tokyo to get into a title match, now did she?"

Just once in their life would be enough.

With it, life would become much easier. It would prove that they lived as Shogi players.

The goal that Jin and Tamayo strived for, a title, was nothing but a stop along the path for this 11-year-old girl.

"So you have to go! If you're too scared to go alone, I'll tag along as moral support. I've got plenty of room on my schedule since I opened it up for a title match I'm not in (ha-ha)."

"..... Why?"

"Hm?"

Ai, who had quietly listened up to this point, howled with a fresh wave of tears streaming down her cheeks.



“WHY ARE YOU SO NICE?!!”

“Because you’re trying so hard, that’s why,” responded Tamayo without missing a beat. “I’m not nice. It’s just that seeing how you face the board changed me. That’s another talent of yours probably your biggest, too.”

A new world that she had never envisioned before Ai moved in with her was now unfolding before Tamayo’s eyes. The girl named Ai Hinatsuru had the power to change the future.

“And yep, it’s got to be said.”

“What is it now?! Geez!!”

“Come on! Let’s go make all those reporters standing outside feel totally awkward by walking out there together!”

She then pulled Ai to her feet and slipped her arm around her neck like a headlock. Puffing out her chest with pride, Tamayo stepped out the door with Ai in tow.

I’d always wanted one.

A cheeky little sister to play Shogi with.

THE LONGEST DAY FOR TWO

The day after the Women's Legend League, once called the Women's A Division, wrapped up.

The final matches of the Professional A Division are taking place in the very same building.

The day dubbed the longest day in the Shogi world has become a yearly event in its own right, with everyone from players, staff and even TV personalities with a taste for Shogi dropping by the Katsura no Ma. The second-floor classroom is closed to the public in the evening to host commentary late into the night. There's so much to do.

Of course, I'm working at the big board. I'm a popular Women's Player, after all!

"Hello out there~☆ This is the girl who lost out on challenging for a title by instant death in the Women's Legend League yesterday, Tamayon Rokuroba~☆"

"I-I'm the one who got it, Ai Hinatsuru! I'm sorry!"

"And I'm one of the ones who got kicked out of that League, Rin Koiji! Everybody drops, drops, drops—like flies!!"

"K-Koiji-sensei? Only two players will be eliminated from the A Division"

"Shut your yap! They should all have to know what it feels like!!"

Rinrin's lost it.

This fun (?) analysis goes on and on. Around the time I forcibly escort the elementary school girl into a taxi bound for her family's inn (she insisted on staying until the end, but I insisted even harder that she tell her parents she's in the title match in person), results start to come in and we see who's getting the axe.

Two ex-title holders in the Meijin's generation end up being dropped down to the B-1 Division.

There they are, members of the golden generation up on stage and bowing to the fans even though their faces make it seem like they think the world is coming to an end. Demoted players don't always come up to talk with the commentators, but these did.

The fans are crying along with them soon enough.

I take a second to burn this moment when the torch is officially handed down to the next generation into my memory, but the only thing I can think about is the one match that hasn't finished yet.

It's——the one that decides the Meijin Challenger.

Jin Natagiri 8-*dan* versus Mitsuru Oishi 9-*dan*. A battle for the top of their own generation.

That match glows so brightly because they're friends, so close in age and yet they have completely opposite views on Shogi and on life in general.

The late-game is epic with their very lives colliding in one final clash. Every move sparks gasps and sighs from the audience.

It ends at 2:18 in the morning.

That's when I do something a Professional Women's League Player simply isn't supposed to do.

Cry right in the middle of doing commentary.

Try as I might, words just won't come out. Tears keep flowing and I can't say a word.

"Tamayon. Like, I got this."

"Sorry"

I hand Rinrin the microphone and rush up to the arena.

It takes a lot of bobbing and weaving to make it through all the reporters and staff jam-packed into the room, but I make it just in time to see Jin-Jin being interviewed.

His congratulatory interview for becoming the Meijin Challenger.

“This will be your first Meijin Title Match. Can you tell us what is going through your mind right now?”

“..... Getting this chance to play against the Meijin again so soon after failing to win the Monarch Title I’m truly grateful.”

Too tired to manage a smile, he keeps trying to get words out.

“How do you anticipate the seven-match series will unfold?”

“I’m sure the rumor mills are already saying I’m bound to lose. I can hardly blame them for that either. Because, well, I still don’t understand how I lost that last match”

“Does that mean you haven’t finished analyzing the match?”

“Sure does.” Jin nods at the surprised reporters and continues, “I don’t know. So I’m going to keep challenging him until I do. I’ll keep challenging him until he’s so bored of my face that he forks over a title to get me off his case. No matter how many times it takes See?”

I wait for Jin-Jin in the back stairwell that only players and staff use. Once I spot him coming down, I casually strike up a conversation.

“Hey.”

I smile and wave with my back still leaning against the wall.

“Meijin Challenger, huh? Now that’s special.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Oh, and by the way.”

My voice comes out very quick and I stare at the floor. I can’t take silence right now.

There’s something I really want to say, but something else slips out of my mouth. A question that I never considered in the first place.

“Jin-Jin. Did you take Ai in to help me? Or am I just being too self-centered?”

“I brought her in for my benefit alone.”

Jin-Jin’s answer couldn’t have been more clear-cut.

“..... But I was planning to share some of the benefits with you.”

“How thoughtful.”

I got some valuable experience because of it. I’m grateful, truly.

But that answer shook my confidence. Should I say it, or should I not?

I hesitate for just a second and——.

“I never understood the people who took apprentices. Never.”

He leans against the wall next to me and starts talking.

“The same goes for people who start families. All that does is just drain your time and energy, for goodness sake.”

“.....”

“But a little something changed all that.”

“Do you mean Ai?” I ask while my confidence evaporates. Yeah, I shouldn’t say it, should I?

Jin-Jin is staring off into space as his story takes a sudden turn.

“You see, back when I was still an up-and-comer, I had the opportunity to teach a little girl how to play Shogi. Teaching a kid who doesn’t even know how to use the pieces was nothing but a waste of time, or so I thought when I tried to turn it down. The association, however, wouldn’t take no for an answer and forced me to sign on Then I met her.”

“.....! Was that?”

“It was so queer to me. I had less time to spend on my own Shogi But, for whatever reason, thinking of ways to teach that girl how to play made Shogi fun. I started winning league matches in bunches. I knew I’d improved because I could feel it.”

I’m so glad this building is an antique.

With the stairwell so dark, Jin-Jin won’t notice the tears building in my eyes or how my face and even my ears have turned completely red

“I wanted to feel that sensation one more time and to get it across. It’s something I can’t teach myself, after all.”

To whom? I sure don’t need to ask.

He didn’t just answer the question I had. Jin-Jin gave me so much more.

So——.

“Natagiri-*sensei*.”

I step away from the wall and turn to face Jin-Jin.

Then, I put on my war face and say.

“I love you.”

Just like he did back then, Jin-Jin looked deeply into my eyes.

“Tamayo You don’t have any older or younger brothers, right?”

“No. You know that.”

“Well, that looks like I’ll have to make do with just the one.”

“Yep. You’ll have to make do with me.”

Quickly wiping the fresh tears off my cheeks with my fingers, I softly pounded my fists against Jin-Jin’s chest.

Nothing’s changed. Not right away, at least.

Even so, it’s still a baby step forward. I’ll keep challenging. I’ll keep challenging him until he gets bored and says, “Fine, fine,” and accepts me. I already have his research room, so taking his is just one step away, right?

“Brought home a crazy girl, didn’t you? Well, too bad! Because I’m never letting go!”

This man taught me Shogi.

Which means that, to me, Shogi without Jin Natagiri is unimaginable.

Ai Hinatsuru helped me recognize that pure, earnest desire.

I thought claiming a title was the be-all, end-all goal at the end of the path.

That everything would get easier after that.

Once would be enough. Taking that view from the top would make the rest of my life completely different. Now was my best chance With Ginko Sora gone and Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin not yet grown into their own, this was my last chance.

But I thought wrong.

—I want to play Shogi! For the rest of my life! With Jin-Jin!!

So long as this man keeps challenging, I'll keep challenging, too. I'll keep running to the end of time!

That is the path to happiness that I have chosen to take.

“Once the Meijin Title Match is done——.”

“Once it's done, what?”

“I think I might stop by Numazu to say hello to your family for the first time in a good long while.”

“?! D-Does that——”

Is he going to ask permission to marry me?!

My heart's racing like I got blindsided by a checkmate. Jin-Jin grins as if he can see the butterflies in my stomach. Then, the Meijin Challenger says this.

“After all, your father is so my type.≡”

“?! Hey! Don't wreck my family!!”

THE BEST PRESENT

Ma-chan gets back to Amanohashidate late at night.

“First is the consolation party, correct? Then we are to celebrate the completion of the manuscript!”

Of course I’m prepared to accompany her to hell and back tonight.

“What would you like to do with my columns? I’ve got them printed out

“I’m much more in the mood for a stiff drink than manuscripts at the moment.”

I couldn’t have agreed more, so I called down to the front desk to have room service bring up food and drinks for both of us. In the meantime, Ma-chan relieves all that built-up stress from her match and the traveling with a dip in the hot spring. She comes back dressed in a *yukata* robe and our party night begins.

The weather takes a turn for the worse right away.

A blizzard hits, a big one the likes of which hasn’t happened here in years. The old building rattles and clatters in the wind as the coastline gets battered by constant waves throughout the night. Any other time, I’d be scared stiff that this ancient building would fall apart, but——.

“AAHAHA!”

Ma-chan, who almost never drinks, laughs the entire time.

She’s drunk, for sure.

“Testing out all the magic she read against you, Yaichi?! Doesn’t Ginko know human experimentation is cruel?! It now makes far too much sense that her younger brother apprentice was warped into the twisted lolicon he is today! AAAAAAAAAAAAAHA!!”

“I know, right?! It’s all Big Sis’s fault that I turned into a loli- Wait, wait!! You’re saying that I’m not actually a lolicon, aren’t you?!!”

“Tales of the Kiyotaki household are all such a lark! Forget the columns, these

stories would make a stupendous book on their own! You must tell me more!
≡”

“..... Okay, here’s a doozy for you.”

I realize liquid courage has a lot to do with it, but Ma-chan is recovering from the damage she took in that loss surprisingly well.

So now’s a good time to tell her *that story*.

“One day, Ai came up to me out of the blue and said this: Master what do I do? She looked devastated.”

“Oh, was she? And why was that?”

“Oh, it was perfect! She looked up at me like the world was about to end and said I don’t have any more Shogi puzzles left to do Can you believe that?!”

“AHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! Just how much does she love those puzzles?! The apprentice is just as warped as the Master!”

“So I went to somebody I know who knows a thing or two about computers and had them create some puzzles for her. A whole mess of them.”

“Computers? Why do computers factor into it?” Ma-chan asks with genuine curiosity, so I reveal the trick.

“Software can play against itself and other programs at high speed, right? So I had him extract the formations right before checkmate to put together 50,000 puzzles directly from real matches.”

“.....!!”

It’s possible to make an endless supply of Shogi puzzles that way.

And I can’t think of a more efficient method to train for all the new late-game situations that happen with software.

“I see So that is what caused my failure”

The first inkling of sadness shows up on Ma-chan’s face as she quietly whispers.

“..... After experiencing that terror in the late-game myself, I know all too

well. The present you gave Ai was no mere collection of Shogi puzzles.”

“.....”

“Yaichi, you gifted Ai with an era in which she could use her talents to the fullest extent, did you not? Using me to do so You egregious lolicon”

The era was going to come to an end sooner or later, but

“Kuzuryu’s Notebook might have sped up the clock just a little bit Thank you, Ma-chan.”

Formations and strategies aren’t the only things that are going to change.

Ai and the generation beneath her won’t be taught by human beings.

Once that happens will the Master-apprentice relationship disappear too?

Everyone I’ve met in my life, I met because of Shogi. Master, Big Sis, the two Ais Even friends like Ma-chan and Ayumu.

If human connections like that also disappear, then——.

“Kh kh khkh ngh ah”

“Ma-chan?”

I thought she was laughing at first. Just like she’s been laughing all this time.

But, it’s the opposite.

*Drip Drip The little splashes of water on the *tatami* mat prove it.*

“Wahh Waaahh! Ngh Waaaaahh-ah! Waaaaaahhh!!”

Ma-chan starts bawling like a little kid.

Just like she did back when we met at the Elementary Meijin Tournament.

“Nggghhh! Wah WAAAAAAHHHH! UWAAAAHHHHHH!!”

“Gaah Sorry, Ma-chan I’m sorry”

Now wasn’t the time to tell her that story after all.

“Don’t cry”

This is all my fault, but I don’t know how to fix it and I’m just so sorry about the whole thing that all I can do is tell Ma-chan don’t cry, over and over like a

broken record.

How many times has this played out before?

Ma-chan wipes away the tears with both hands and says, “..... You gave Ai a present? That’s not fair”

“I know I’m sorry”

“..... Give me a present, too”

“Sure. If it’s something I can give you What do you want?”

“A time slip.”

“Huh?”

Her request is so out there I doubt my ears.

“Surely you remember? Our conversation on the train when we arrived here in Amanohashidate.”

“Y-Yeah”

Ma-chan quietly asked me a question that day: *Do you ever wish for a chance to relive your life? To correct the mistakes you’ve made thus far?*

I couldn’t answer her. I mean, it’s impossible anyway. But——.

“I would relish the chance to do so.”

“Why? What would you change? Your match today? Or your whole life?”

“My story with you, Yaichi.”

With that, Machi gets to her feet.

Then, she loosens her *yukata* sash——.

The fabric falls, almost in slow motion, into a pile at her feet——.

Her birthday suit completely exposed, Machi Kugui says....

“Look at me... not as a player or journalist just me.”

I can't believe what's happening in front of my eyes, just the pure beauty of her naked body is breathtaking.

The more I tell myself I shouldn't be looking, the more my eyes get pulled in

"N——."

Recovering from the shock, I panic and turn my back.

"No, don't do this! I-I know how bad losing big matches hurts, but you're going overboard You can't get drunk and strip down in front of a guy who isn't your lover! It's not right!!"

I get up to leave the room, but——Ma-chan wraps her arms around me from behind to keep me inside.



“Don’t leave me by my lonesome.”

“M-Ma-chan Please, just let me go, okay? If you don’t, I’ll have to force my way——.”

“That, you cannot.”

She pulls me in tight, cutting me off and pressing her whole body against me at the same time.

Between the feeling of her soft skin and the sweet smell of alcohol on her breath, I can’t think straight anymore.

All these vivid sensations hit so much harder than just seeing her naked I’m on the verge of losing my mind.

“..... For I am aware, Yaichi, aware that you are unable to abandon me. Yaichi Kuzuryu is simply unable to leave a girl shedding tears after losing a Shogi match to suffer on her own.”

“.....”

“I am not the only one. The same holds true for Ai and Ten-chan. As you are much too kind for your own good, you cannot forsake a girl in pain. That is particularly true for *the poorest girl of them all*——.”

“MA-CHAN!!”

I shout to stop her before she rips open her heart.

“You’re not crying anymore, see? That means I can pull your hands off me. Want me to show you?”

“Have you still not noticed?”

“What?”

“You are the one in tears, Yaichi.”

I’m crying?

“Ever since arriving at this inn, you have cried in your sleep without fail. Everything from tears to nightmarish moans All the while calling out a certain name on an endless loop”

“.....! Well, um

“Shackled, even in your own dreams. Poor, poor, Yaichi.”

Offense and defense switched places at some point.

I can't break free from Ma-chan's delicate arms.

Actually, I'm pretty sure her grip on me is even tighter than before——.

“..... But Even still, those girls are all I”

“Shogi lineage bonds are fleeting. No matter how many attempts you may have to try again, Ai and Ginko shall both disappear from you. You said so yourself.”

“.....”

“But is that truly your fault, Yaichi? From my point of view, you have simply been thrown by the wayside. It is only natural your wounds would run deep!”

Since everyone is always blaming me Since I'm always blaming myself, those words are sweet narcotic nectar.

“I yearn to see more of your Shogi, Yaichi. I yearn to see you rise to the top of the Shogi world. I will do anything, anything at all to soothe your scars. Anything”

Ma-chan knows more about me than I know about myself. Her sequence has me completely contained, sealing off any chances I had to counter.

“Additionally I am able to gift you with the best present, Yaichi.”

“And that is?”

“Something that will never betray you,” says Ma-chan as she unties my sash from behind. “Not something as fickle as Shogi but one which is bound to you by real blood.”

“.....!! Do you mean?”

Machi Kugui mercilessly pummels a desire sleeping deep within me that even I hadn't noticed was there.

She knows how because she learned more about me than anyone while working as a Shogi journalist.

Everything Ma-chan is saying is something that my heart wants in one way or

another.

Even things that I've been pursuing without realizing it——.

"I love you."

Ahh

Ma-chan gives me the most comforting words, the words I've been longing to hear.

"I love your Shogi. I love the magical strategies you speak of. I love the way in which you write. I love your mannerisms while holding Shogi pieces. I love the way your eyes behold the board. I absolutely adore you playing Shogi, Yaichi."

Just like the way she convinced me to write a book, Ma-chan always has a way of giving me something.

A way to fill the gaping hole of loneliness.

Her words. Her body.

And her heart.

"It is possible to pin all of the blame on me at this very moment. I, having lost myself in the agony of defeat, resorted to alcohol and sought you out for comfort Perfectly explained."

Machi's petite fingers make bold moves.

And then my *yukata* falls to the floor.

"I love you and your sins, Yaichi."

The verse that Ma-chan recited at Amanohashidate.

The meaning behind *ware mo tsumi-noko, kimi mo tsumi-noko*.

I looked it up once I got my smartphone back.

Two forbidden lovers cannot hold back the feelings they have for each other any longer and allow their hearts to take over. A song about cheating.

It's——a song about betraying those most important to you.

Which means that Ma-chan already had this in mind back then

“No one shall ever know what transpires this deep in the countryside. This storm shall stifle any noise. No matter how raucous the encounter becomes it can always remain our secret”

Secret.

That word is just as provocative as the feeling of her bare skin pressing against mine.

If we kept it a secret like that night on the Shogi retreat——.

“Ma-chan.”

I turn around and look at her, face to face.

“Ah! Yaichi!! Oh, Yaichi, Yaichi, Yaichi!!” Caressing my chest up and down, Ma-chan absentmindedly whispers, “Let us begin anew. Start a story without Ai or Ginko involved——.”

“My story is right here.”

“..... Huh?”

Once I knew the meaning behind that poem, I understood what the answer was.

I figured out what Ma-chan had wished for at Amanohashidate Shrine.

Which is why I prepared all of it.

A way to answer those feelings.

“Read. This is my answer.”

Picking up my *yukata* off the floor, I slip it back on before going over to get Ma-chan’s and drape it over her shoulders. Then I give her the manuscripts.

“Are these the columns? The ones you plan to submit for the book? Why now of all times would you——?”

Ma-chan cocks a confused eyebrow as she scans the first page.

“.....!!”

Suddenly she starts reading for real.

What I have printed out for her—is the story of a Shogi ghost.

It's about a country boy who came to the big city to train to become a Shogi player. He meets a Shogi ghost who happens to be inhabiting his Master's house, and they grow up together.

However, the Shogi ghost disappears and leaves the boy behind.

That's why the boy decided to write a book. Considering how much the ghost loved Shogi, there was no doubt in his mind that she would read it.

"Remember what you taught me when I said I had writer's block? You said you wanted kids who couldn't read very well to understand Kuzuryu's Notebook."

"....."

"She was the one who read books to me when I couldn't read them myself. She tried out the strategies that were written in the book on me I learned what the book was about that way. It was how we read together"

The silver-haired Shogi ghost loved reading all of the books in Master's place.

And I loved watching her read them.

"When I couldn't think of what to write, I remembered what she looked like when she was reading And ideas started coming. All the questions went away, and words started to flow naturally."

I always waited for her to finish whatever chapter she was on like a puppy. Once she got out her plastic Shogi board, she'd line up the new strategy and summarize for me.

Even now, I'm waiting for her to do the same thing.

"I wasn't crying because I was sad. It's because I was happy. I know it's just in dreams, but I get to see the Shogi ghost again."

I can't deny that losing my Shogi family put me in despair.

Those wounds are still fresh.

"But I still believe! I believe that Shogi creates lasting bonds between people."

I spell out my everlasting love for Shogi at the end of the column.

My love for Shogi and my love for the Shogi ghost.

It's the passage that turned my face bright red after I finished writing it.

"No matter how many times I get hurt, no matter how much pain I go through I would still take Ai as my apprentice, and I would still fall in love with Ginko."

Just as I would still keep playing Shogi if I lost tens of thousands of times.

Even if that meant making mistakes I couldn't undo.

"So I'm sorry, but I can't do that with you, *Machi*."

Beautiful, and a strong Shogi player.

A kind wife who understands me better than anyone else on earth.

A cute kid who looks exactly like her.

If I had a warm, loving family to welcome me after every hard-fought match.

If I could achieve that happiness by redoing a part of my life.

Should someone ask me if those thoughts cross my mind when I'm all alone I couldn't deny it.

Should someone ask me if I didn't consider it when Machi said she loved me, I couldn't deny that either.

So I think the first thing I'll do when I see her again is apologize. That includes the Shogi retreat I've kept secret all these years.

She'll be furious, I'm sure. I can already hear her usual drop dead and put your head on a pike threats, but I miss them too.

"..... You dastard, Yaichi", Machi mumbles without looking up from the page. "Just like this, you always, always make me an observer"

Plip P-Plip

My resolve shatters so easily after seeing those pearly tears fall onto the paper.

"Ahh Don't cry. You can't cry Not over me"

“No, no. I shall cry.”

She begrudgingly glares at me as my nerves teeter on the edge.

Then, puffing her cheeks out like a little kid, my first editor holds the manuscript tight against her chest and says.

“After reading such a touching story How could I not cry?!”

“I’m using that photo for the author’s picture, by the way.”

I didn’t understand what the editor-in-chief meant when he said so.

“It’s a great one, that. Maybe you finally outdid the one I took 10 years ago, hm? But, yeah, we’ll be using your picture from the title match on the cover, so go along with it, okay?!”

There’s no one else here at the association’s editorial department. My boss seems to be in a particularly good mood as he shows me the cover samples for Kuzuryu’s Notebook that just came back from the printer.

“Boss No, Master.”

I interrupt Taisei Kayaoku 7-*dan*, the man who is both my superior and my Master.

The Shogi Association typically puts publication responsibilities on the shoulders of professional players themselves.

However, Master is the only one who took on editing duties as well.

After retirement, Master left the classroom he runs in his hometown Kyoto to an apprentice who has promotional instructor qualifications. Now he lords over the editorial department in the basement of the association building in Sendagaya with too much free time on his hands.

Although that is the very reason I have as much freedom as I do

“I apologize for going well over budget for the sake of one book. However, Kuzuryu’s Notebook is guaranteed to sell and will surely change the Shogi world

as we know it. It's the association's duty to release——."

"I don't doubt the quality. What was it I taught you as your Master, hm?"

"How to structure an article, how to take photographs and how to edit and collect material."

"That's right. Because my Shogi wasn't up to snuff. After that Elementary Meijin tournament, when you asked me to take you under my wing as an apprentice, I made up my mind right then and there that I wouldn't teach you a thing on the board. Instead——."

"What was it?"

"That I would tell you something once you took a picture like this. It's the reason why a complete amateur's picture can be so powerful. Would you like to know?"

"! Yes. Please enlighten me."

"It's love," said Master with a face more serious than I've seen in ages. "A pro photographer analyzes their subject with a cool head and tries to take a good picture. It's just like how pro players ignore the styles they enjoy and play the ones most likely to win."

"....."

"But, amateurs take pictures because they want to take a picture. Think back to parents at recitals and Little League sports. They take pictures of their own kids like their lives depend on it, yeah? That's how those miracle shots turn up, as one in those hundreds."

"In other words it's the photographer's love that's important?"

"When I took that picture years ago, it was the first one I wanted to take in a long time. That little girl crying up on the podium She pulled at my heartstrings. She reminded me a lot of my daughter back when she was that age."

My heart is already in a weakened state, but those words deliver a final blow.

I remove my glasses with a start and wipe away tears forming in my eyes.

"Where did that come from? Are you offering praise to your recently

heartbroken apprentice?”

“It’s too early to jump to conclusions, now. I’ll cut to the chase.”

He picks up the cover sample again.

“The cover photo Kuzuryu’s expression as he claims his first victory against the Meijin in last year’s Ryuo Title Match isn’t bad at all. You’ve captured his desire to become even stronger very well. The thing is, though——.”

Master points to a small picture on the edge of the cover.

It’s a snapshot I took of Yaichi—at the water’s edge close to Amanohashidate Shrine after I splashed him with *isoshimizu* spring water.

“A lot more comes across in this picture. *That includes your voice.*”

“..... My voice?”

“Even in this tiny little picture, your voice comes through loud and clear. And, if you look at the picture from 10 years ago after seeing it——.”

Master takes a Shogi magazine from 10 years ago off his desk and immediately opens it to the exact page that I’ve opened hundreds of times before. Except this time, I hear it surprisingly clearly.

“I’ve loved you since the day we met.”

There was no need to redo anything. I should have said so at Amanohashidate Shrine.

Recounted the tale of the girl watching over her first love.

The girl in the princess’s shadow who kept her feelings hidden and only worked up the courage to come forward because she wanted him to smile again.

“..... But it’s already too late. If only you had told me sooner, I Master, you fool Why didn’t you say so sooner? Jerk”

“Too late? Say so sooner? Good grief. Has Machi the Tormentor gone soft?”

My Master, who has watched the careers of many players over the years and

written so much about them that he has been dubbed the Sage, continues.

“Take a look at Kuzuryu’s face. You’ll feel something, I guarantee it!”

He enthusiastically points at Yaichi in the picture taken by his apprentice and tells me.

The boy’s story is ongoing. The princess may still be the heroine right now, but——.

My story, my love is also ongoing and it is only just begun at long last.

THE STORY I DEDICATE TO YOU

Two weeks after my cramming session—and the book is done.

“Whooooa! My maiden release!!”

That table with 10 copies of Kuzuryu’s Notebook stacked up on it might not look like much to anyone else, but to me it shines like it has its own spotlight.

It’s rare for players in the Shogi world to see their efforts take a physical shape. So, having something to show for all that time and energy I committed is extremely gratifying. M-Man, I’m over the moon right now!!

“I had no idea you could get them so far in advance!!”

“Naturally. Both east and west associations will have exclusive early sales events.”

The book won’t hit shelves until April. Machi explains to me that they plan to release it along with the start of the next Shogi season.

“So, Yaichi. What about your complimentary copies?”

“My what?”

“Did you not read about them in your contract? The author shall purchase 10 copies as samples. They are typically given as gifts to those the author would like to thank.”

“Oh, now that I think about it, I’ve gotten books from Shogi players before.”

I thought they were just passing along books that they got from the publisher for free, but they actually paid for them? Well, I should’ve been more grateful

“As many players write personalized messages with autographs for fans, they also write messages in their books when giving them as presents. Thus, I have brought all 10 of the samples with me for the contract signing.”

“So, if I sign and stamp these, then give them to you——.”

“I shall see to it that they are delivered to those you wish. Also, there may be a few individuals the publisher would wish to send copies to as well. The Meijin,

for instance.”

“Th-They’re going to send it to the Meijin?!”

“Wouldn’t the appearance of one of the strategies contained in Kuzuryu’s Notebook in the Meijin Title Match serve as the best possible advertisement?”

Would he actually use one?

And, if one of my out-there strategies does show up in the Meijin Title Match, knowing that they’d get blasted for using a strategy that is indecent scares me. The amateur reviewers are going to roast me online

“Also, sending copies to famous individuals is a must. Naniwa’s Snow White, for one.”

Her dropping that name so casually sets me off.

“.....!! Did you find out?! Do you know where Big Sis is right now?!”

“I have known the entire time.”

..... Come again?

“Huh? Wha- HUH?! You knew?! Then why the hell did I work myself half to death to write this book in the first place?!”

“You completed the book, so what does it matter? And, do you not feel the joy of accomplishment?”

“W-Well, yeah, but that’s not the point——.”

“The address of where Ginko is convalescing is written on this piece of paper.”

My heart skips five beats.

Even my muscles freeze up

My chest hurts, like my heart is being strangled from all sides It hurts so bad, I could cry

“Big Sis is here?”

“Aye. I met with her myself. As O-Ryou accompanied me, I cannot hide that fact. Ginko seemed very well, surprisingly so.”

“Ryou talked with Big Sis, too?!”

“That she did not. O-Ryou lacked the courage and chose to remain in the car. She is always faint of heart in the biggest moments.”

Machi keeps talking with the piece of paper held out in front of me.

“There is a chance the staff will forbid you from seeing her. In that event, your journey will have been a waste of time and Ginko may be transferred as well. Are you willing to take that risk?”

“.....”

I want to see her. I want to see her face even one second sooner.

Every cell in my body is screaming it. I want to see her. I wanna, I wanna, I WANNA, I WANNA!

But——.

“Everything I want to say to her right now is written in this book,” I say flatly and push the paper back to Machi. “Writing the book made me realize that, at the end of the day, I want to play Shogi with her. Ever since the first time we played on the second floor of Master’s place I’ve been getting stronger to play against her because it was so much fun”

Even if I did get to speak with her, knowing how bad I am with words, I wouldn’t be able to do anything for her.

But, with Shogi.

“Ginko said so herself. She became a pro so she could play against me. There’s no doubt in my mind that that feeling won’t change.”

I pick up a book and hand it to Machi as is.

“She doesn’t need my stamp. Give this one to her without any extras.”

She always tried out the strategies she learned in books on me. I know she used me for human experimentation.

So, if I sent her this book, she’ll definitely——.

——That girl was sitting in a chair on the gently sunlit terrace with a book in her arms, as usual.

That being said, her snowy white skin was vulnerable to sunlight. Thus, the

chair in the corner where direct sunlight couldn't reach by the slimmest of margins had become hers by default. It had become routine that she would absorb herself in a book in this very spot once her watch's hands indicated a certain time.

She had loved books for as long as she could remember.

For a girl physically unable to go outside and play, books were the only thing that could teach her what lay beyond the walls of her hospital room.

Romance novels provided by Keika had become a recent favorite of hers.

The story was always the same. An oppressed heroine would happen upon a man with high social status in some way or another and the two would marry. Their relationship would be rocky at first, but would draw closer until Those kinds of stories.

Though she belittled them for predictability, the exhilaration they provided along with well-timed cliffhangers made her read all the way to the end. Another reason she kept coming back was that she could hold those paperback books for hours on end without getting tired despite having so little energy.

However, she was holding a different book on this day. This one was much thicker than normal, and about Shogi.

"Oh? Ginko, that book"

Keika was taken by surprise.

The girl had read many books since she arrived at this facility, but she had been unable to read a single one about Shogi.

However, one look and Keika understood why right away.

With that cover, how could she not?

"..... Now I see. He holed up somewhere to write a book, huh? I was worried for nothing!"

Keika left to prepare some tea, angrily mumbling about how she was going to demand copies for herself and her father once she got home but couldn't hide the glint of happiness in her eyes.

For what reason did Yaichi Kuzuryu write this book? Who did he want to read

it?

The answer to those questions was on the very first page.

To the Shogi ghost who inhabited the second floor of my Master's house, I dedicate this story to you, as well as my love.

“..... Stupid.”

She flipped through the pages, skipping over the Shogi sections entirely to read the columns instead.

Every single one of them was about her about the Shogi ghost.

She felt her cheeks growing warmer with every page. Every so often she whispered stupid under her breath.

To anyone else, Kuzuryu's Notebook was a book about Shogi strategy. A very creative one at that.

To the girl, however it was a love letter on a massive scale.

A small paper fluttered out from between the pages. It landed at the girl's feet and she rushed to pick it up before it got carried away by the breeze.

It was a bookmark with Regards printed on the front. Graceful letters written by a steady hand were on the back.

“You had best return quickly, else I shall take him for my own.”

Then, she turned the cover over to look at the author's photograph and gasped.

“.....! Ya i”

She had not seen her younger brother apprentice's face in half a year.

The instant his kind smile met her eyes, she couldn't help but embrace the book against her chest.

Once she realized someone else had taken that picture, however, her ire rose instantaneously.

It was jealousy hot, burning jealousy.

“Stupid how dare you show another woman that face Stupid.”

Once she ripped the cover clean off the book, she decided to try reading it all the way through from the beginning. This book inundated with countless numbers and charts, from start to finish.

Her trembling fingers turned the page——.

And, little by little, Ginko Sora began to push open the door that led back to the battlefield.



FOR THE AFTERWORD

“Is this Papa’s book?”

Recently, my two-year-old daughter has started asking me this while pointing at copies of *The Ryuo’s Work Is Never Done!* in my bookcase. Then again, she’ll point at any character and yell, “GIIINKOOO!” so I’m not sure how much she really understands.

She’s not showing much interest in anime just yet. Still, I get the feeling that this two-year-old obsessed with animal picture books has an inkling of what her father is writing when he goes into his office.

This volume is about Yaichi and Machi’s story.

Light novels are quite a bit different from Shogi books, and I feel that Shogi books can be rather particular sometimes. But there are some similarities between the two.

Techniques that allow children and adults to enjoy it—just as a two-year-old who can’t read will enjoy bright colorful pictures, the illustrations in Shogi books are more than enough to stimulate the imagination. The authors do all sort of things to make them simple and fun to read so that their books can be enjoyed by as many people as possible.

The book that Yaichi and Machi wrote together will have a large impact on many people within the story.

In much the same way, I want to use as many techniques as I can to make *The Ryuo’s Work Is Never Done!* invigorating for everyone who reads it!

REVIEW SESSION



REVIEW SESSION

“I’m not even sure what the dress code for a reunion is supposed to be

We arrive at a big, famous French restaurant in Shibuya, Tokyo.

Ayumu is the one who picked out this place, which is built like a palace, to mark ten years since the four of us first met at a TV studio for the Elementary Meijin Tournament here in Shibuya.

“I bought a new suit because the restaurant has a dress code, but I never thought I’d stick out so much, Ayumu’s usually got that covered, but he fits right in

“Course you’d stick out wearing all black like that, you idiot. What do you think this is, a funeral?” Ryou Tsukiyomizaka snaps.

I try to come up with a comeback but can only nod along in the end. I was planning to wear this suit to a match, but my fighting spirit has already been shattered in it.

“Sides, you shoulda known better than to show up in all black anyway! There’s Ginko for one and your apprentice dumped you, right?”

“Uhh Well, about that

I pause to come up with the right words to answer that hard question when a sulking voice cuts in from the side.

“It aligns with the tastes of the new woman he resides with.”

“Hey?! Ma-cha- Machi! Don’t make it sound like something it’s not!”

“Then why are you flustered, Yaichi? You always claim to be interested in older, busty women and yet it appears that adolescents are what trips your trigger. Your behavior matches that of a lolicon to a T, so what harm is there in saying so?”

Ryou notices that we’re calling each other by different names and presses for more information.

“What happened with you guys, eh?”

“Insignificant nothingness, I assure you. Otherwise, I would not be attending this reunion. I should be making regular visits to a maternity clinic and unable to consume alcohol by this point, but *grumble, grumble*

“Like I said, stop giving them the wrong idea!!”

Machi has been downing glasses of wine one after another since before the reunion, so she’s already drunk as a skunk.

Since it’s my fault she’s drinking so much to begin with, I can’t really tell her to stop

“Yaichi and Ma-chan, eh? Sounds like you’re little kids playin’ house to me, but we are having a reunion. It’s kinda fitting in a way.”

“In that case, should I call you Ryou-chan too?”

“Screw you.”

My shin gets kicked under the table.

It was Big Sis’s fault that I stopped calling Machi by her nickname. Now I remember why I stopped adding chan to the end of Ryou’s name. I was just scared. This pain reminded me.

An elegant woman who looks like she stepped out of Victorian England smiles down at our banter as if watching something wholesome.

“He-he-he. Prospering as ever I see, young Ryuo.”

Our guest at this reunion—is the one who worked as a commentator at the Elementary Meijin Tournament where we all met, Women’s Legend Rina Shakando.

She also came up with the idea for this reunion.

“It would be so nice to see everyone’s faces once again. Would you please acquiesce to your elder’s request?”

Machi and I were looking for a chance to give her our book, so we came up to Tokyo together.

Considering that my apprentice is about to play Shakando-sensei in a title match, giving her the book right beforehand kind of looks like giving her a helping hand. But my apprentice proved that a little push like that won’t be a

problem during her match against Machi.

“To think that you, young Ryuo, would work with Machi to produce your maiden release. So, it was your influence that sparked the flush of talent on Machi’s part in the final Women’s Legend League match.”

“I was but a mere means to an end. My bout with Ai made it all too clear.”

“Whew. Did anyone else feel that chill?”

Isn’t the conversation taking a very wrong turn?! This is supposed to be a reunion!!

“B-But what we really should be celebrating is Ayumu’s promotion to the A Division! Congrats!!”

I turn to my side to face my best friend dressed up in a white suit.

It’s brand new, too. The white fabric practically shines.

I wanted to put some space between us because we’ve got this yin-yang thing going with these black and white suits, but he seems uncharacteristically nervous today and won’t leave my side.

Shakando-*sensei* called us all here saying it’s a reunion, but with this timing, it’s obvious she wanted to throw a party to congratulate her dear apprentice.

“It’s been half a century since someone made it all the way to A division without a bump in the road, right? That’s amazing!”

Even the sharp-tongued Ryou sounds impressed by that.

“If you, say, make it to the Meijin Title Match this season, wouldn’t that give you a chance to be the youngest Meijin ever?”

“Chairman Tsukimitsu holds the record right now, doesn’t he? Umm he was 21, I think? Your birthday is after his, Ayumu, so that record would be yours.”

“Nonstop promotion from pro debut to Meijin Title Holder would be a first in Shogi history. Please, I will need to interview you. Your articles are quite popular with women’s magazines, as well.”

“It’s true that Ayumu has a handsome face and a sparkling clean record, so

everybody'd root for him to take on the Meijin. I got bashed endlessly online when I challenged the Ryuo, but Ayumu'll get a pass Handsome guys get a pass

"Hey, hey. Don't forget that guy Natagiri might be Meijin at that point."

"But, you know, it'd be nice to see Ayumu take it from *the* Meijin, you know? Nothing against Mr. Natagiri, but I just can't see the Meijin being anything other than the Meijin!"

"Eh? What are you getting so worked up about, trash? Aren't you being a bit rough on that Natagiri guy?"

"It is due to losing his woman. The woman he used to live with."

"Ah, gotcha. Sorry for your loss."

"I'm begging you, stop making things sound the way they're not!!"

Even while trying to straighten out misunderstandings, my heart feels lighter somehow.

Time spent together with friends, busting each other's chops like this is pretty fun after all. Even if I'm getting hung out to dry among us

"Anyway, let's celebrate Ayumu tonight! Okay?!"

Our food is just starting to arrive, so I clink my glass and propose a toast.

"It hurts knowing I have fallen so far behind, but You have my permission to keep the title warm for me until I become the Ryuo Meijin. So, go get it already!!"

Ayumu's response to my encouragement is—.

"....."

Huuuh?

After all that time I spent on the bullet train coming up with the perfect one-liner, nothing? Why? He loves this kind of thing.

Wait, is he nervous?

"..... Meijin Meijin"

"Hm?"

He's staring into his lap and mumbling under his breath. I take a closer look and see he's holding a small box in his lap.

"Ayumu Isn't that——?"

He hasn't let go of it the whole time.

A small square box. Velvet

I realize what's inside it immediately. Because there's someone I wanted to give one of those to as well.

In that moment everything clicks.

Why Ayumu chose this palace of a restaurant. Why he's wearing a new suit.

And why he looks more nervous now than ever before.

"Once I become the Meijin——."

The young man clad in a white suit gets out of his chair and walks toward one of the attendees.

Then the aptly nicknamed Future Meijin and newly promoted A division Shogi player Ayumu Kannabe gets down on one knee and says in a reverent voice, "Please accept my hand in marriage."

The sparkles coming from the ring inside the box are enough to know that he's not joking around.

AUTHOR

SHIROW SHIRATORI

At last, the true heroine in the shadows comes into the light! Machi Kugui has prioritized friendship over a relationship since Book 8, but now she has worked up the courage to make her move. Can Yaichi withstand her advances? While writing I thought to myself, “I’d never betray Ginko if I were Yaichi!” But after seeing Shirabii-*sensei*’s illustrations, I wasn’t so sure Hold strong, Yaichi!

ILLUSTRATOR

SHIRABII

This heat is too much (August now).

The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!

VOLUME 15

Story by Shirow Shiratori Art by Shirabii

Supervision by Saiyuki

RYUO NO OSHIGOTO! 15

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